School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts

Quoniam Si Voluisses Sacrificium: Parables of Impossible Bodies

Eva Bujalka

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DECLARATION:

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Eva Bujalka: 

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers how Georges Bataille's theory of sacrifice can be used to prompt a creative project. I address this both through an exploration of Bataille's notion of sacrifice, and through a collection of five interconnected short stories. The exegesis *Quoniam Si Voluisses Sacrificium* ("For if thou hadst desired sacrifice" (Psalms 50:18)) analyses and contextualises Bataille's theory of sacrifice. Although sacrifice has long been consigned to the past – theoretically, religiously and culturally – Zachhuber and Meszaros contend that sacrifice has always haunted the European mind. Bataille, who was preoccupied with the problem of sacrifice, developed his theory out of the newly established disciplines of anthropology and comparative religion, and drew from nineteenth-century theological and philosophical declarations of the death and absence of God. I argue that, for Bataille, the modern world's simultaneous repugnance towards and fascination with sacrifice signaled the way that sacrifice deeply troubled the modern European imagination. At the heart of Bataille's notion of sacrifice is the assertion that sacrifice is a communicative act, which, after the fall of man (that Bataille felt emerged out of the subject/object divide), functions as a non-productive form of expenditure that unites a community. According to Bataille, the disenchantment of the modern world disabled human communication and effectively isolated people from one another. Bataille proposed that a return to sacrifice could enable people momentarily to recapture a sacred form of communication and communal unity now lost in modernity. Bataille, who realised that ancient sacrificial practices that required the brutality of dismemberment and death were consigned to the past, proposed, instead, that people could pierce the isolation that separated them through excessive and unproductive forms of expenditure – eroticism, laughter and literature.

Bataille believed that only literature that inhabited 'the edge' could rupture utilitarian language, thereby constituting a form of symbolic expenditure, which bordered on the sacrificial. Ever the paradoxical philosopher, Bataille nevertheless realised the impossibility of communicating sacrifice, the loss of the self, or death, through fiction because fiction is always representational. I have contemplated Bataille's notion of the impossible through the sacrificial and self-sacrificial bodies of the characters in my stories: characters who desire their own annihilation; characters who position both protagonists and readers as spectators at a sacrifice. The

impossibility of experiencing sacrifice through fiction has prompted me to examine the form of the parable – or what Kermode describes as a narrative that is at once a similitude and yet also a riddle; a story that reveals as it hides. Through these five thematically linked long short stories, which I have collectively entitled *Parables of Impossible Bodies*, I reimagine historical and mythological accounts of sacrifice in present-day Australia.

CONTENTS

Exegesis: Quoniam Si Voluisses Sacrificium

1. Introduction: Setting the Scene

You have memorised the instructions. It is the night that you have all agreed on, a summer evening in 1937, and you have just caught a suburban Paris-Saint-Lazare line train. You pass from carriage to carriage, seeing people that you know, but trying not to catch their eyes, because you've been warned against it. You find yourself a seat in the last carriage. Here, there are only one or two other commuters that you recognise – you were introduced to them only recently at a café about a week ago, but you can't remember their names. You all avoid each other's gaze. Except for the noise of the train, the silence is perfect. No talking. That was one of the rules. It is an hour-long trip. You will stare at your lap the whole time. When the train arrives at its final destination, the *Gare Saint-Nom-la-Bretèche*, some 30 kilometres west of Paris, you disembark with your fellow commuters, and cross the train tracks. Walk up the footpath and you will notice that there are small groups of people on the roadside. You will recognise them as the people who invited you to the group: there is the man with dark hair, the one you had that awkward conversation with at the café, the conversation about decapitation: Monsieur Bataille; and the woman with the elegantly exhausted face, the one who told you that she was writing a story about the priest who molested her sister, but wouldn't let you read it: Mademoiselle Peignot. You hear that they are lovers, Bataille and Peignot. They were not on the train. They were waiting for you. Walk past them, they are marshals, they will make sure that you do not get lost. Walk with deliberate slowness. They have warned you not to rush. Leave plenty of space between yourself and everyone else. Apparently you want to avoid drawing any suspicion or unwanted attention, although you cannot tell why this caution is necessary. Do they really intend to do something ghastly tonight?

The lights of the town will begin to flicker and fade behind you. You will notice how dark it is getting. And then you will come across the entrance to the forest. Don't be scared, even if you can't see the person ahead of you. They will be there. Step into the forest, leave the town behind. In the forest now, dark night overwhelms you. You have been walking for quite some time. Only thin beams of moonlight occasionally slip between the leaves of the trees to show you the path. There is the cracking of twigs ahead of you, the only sign that someone else is out there. You try not to worry that you've gone off the track, that maybe you should have taken the *other* path – the one that had been clearly signposted a little further up. You want to stop, to turn back, but you force yourself to walk for another few minutes, just so you

can confirm that you are well and truly lost. You begin to count the seconds between the sounds of twigs snapping under the feet of what you assume are the people ahead, like counting the seconds between lightning and thunder. You think that you catch sight of someone. A flash of movement that may have been human or animal. *Where are they?* You wonder. *Where are they?* You're sure you've lost the other members of your party. Are there really guides behind you? But you are not Orpheus, and you don't dare look back. Did you read the instructions carefully? The lights from the city have completely dissolved beyond the thicket; the night is an enveloping blind spot. And that's when you come to it. Just as the instructions said – "*Sur un sol marécageux, au centre d'une forêt, […] se trouve un arbre foudroyé.*"[1] It is a partial clearing, where the earth becomes marshy. There is a fallen tree, blackened on one side. They say it was struck by lightning. Its roots are sticking halfway out of the ground. Everyone is there, silent and waiting for you, all twenty-something of them. There is the snap of branches behind you. You know that there are only a few more of you to come. The marshals were there, right behind you, the whole time. There are lights here, candles and torches. At the foot of the fallen tree is what they have called a 'Greek fire.' The clearing is filled with a smell that you do not recognise. Perhaps, you imagine, they are burning sulfur. Perhaps they are invoking the smell of war, of Mars, of Hell. This is where your night begins.

Extrapolating from twentieth-century French pornographer, mystic-without-God and anti-philosopher Georges Bataille's Dante-esque essay "Instructions for 'meeting' in the forest" (Brotchie 14-17), this is the way that I imagine a night may have begun for an initiate of the sacrificial secret society *Acéphale*.[2] The public face of *Acéphale* was a journal that consisted of some four or five issues that were published between 1936 and 1939, and featured works of art and articles by "luminous" (Biles 127) and "adept" (Stoekl, Introduction, *Visions* xx) figures of the French *avant-garde*.[3] While members of the journal and the secret society overlapped, Bataille's biographer Michel Surya says that simply knowing the authors of the

[1] Trans. "On marshy ground at the center of a forest, [. . .] is a tree struck by lightning" (Bataille *Œuvers Completes II: Écrits posthumes 1922-1940* 77-78).

[2] It is worth noting the possible link between the secret society's name and the ancient Pauline *Acephali* heretics.

[3] Including artist André Masson, philosophers Jean Wahl, Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, writer and later film director Jean Rollin, and Bataille himself.

journal will not shed any light on the secret society (238).[4] Instead, it is through interviews with, and the work of, Bataille's on-again off-again friends, the philosophers Roger Caillois and Pierre Klossowski, that we have any idea of what went on at the society's meetings.[5]

Laura Wittman, in conversation with Stanford University professor Robert Harrison, says that Bataille's creation of the secret society *Acéphale* was an attempt to develop a *sui generis* religion that diverged from all established and institutional religions, yet still embraced, at its core, a form of sacrifice. She says that *Acéphale*, which translates as "without a head," involved "the critique of all forms of authority. That's what the image of 'having no head' comes down to" (Harrison). The cover art of the first issue of *Acéphale* (1936) boasts André Masson's depiction of an *acéphalic*-man: an upright, headless *Vitruvian Man*, arms and legs spread-eagled, with a knife in his left hand, a flaming heart in his right. His nipples are stars, and his intestines are visible though his flesh. He wears his skull at his crotch.

I have described *Acéphale* as a 'sacrificial' secret society, which, while it may sound flamboyant, is certainly not far from Bataille's vision for the group. Of all the things that were said to have occurred at the society's meetings, there was one proposed ritual that, while never performed, has not only captured the imagination of Bataille scholars, but has continued to fascinate scholars of modern French and continental thought: the rumour of a ritual beheading – a literalisation of the very name of the society, the journal, and Masson's *l'homme-acéphale*.[6] Rumour had it that Bataille, among others, offered himself as a victim, but no one was willing to play executioner, and so the society eventually disbanded (Harrison; Stoekl, Introduction, *Visions* xx; Noys, *Georges Bataille: An Introduction* 9).

The secret society, which has remained shrouded in mystery until today, has led Surya to claim that "*Acéphale* is part of the Bataille legend" (237). Bataille, in his own lifetime, was notorious for his alleged double life – a humble

[4] Surya says that, other than Bataille, his lover at the time, Colette Peignott, and friends Caillois and Klossowski, society members may have included "Jacques Chavy, René Chenon, Henri Dubief, Pierre Dugan, Dussat (?), Jean Dautry (and others we do not know)" (247-48).

[5] For more information, see Bernard-Henri Lévy's 1991 work *Les Aventures de Liberté*, in which he interviews Bataille's friend, and former *Acéphale* member, Pierre Klossowski.

[6] The society's rituals were said to include readings of and meditation on the works of Nietzsche and de Sade, the refusal to shake hands with anti-Semites, and the commemoration of the execution of Louis XVI, which involved soaking a human skull in brine and placing it at the base of the obelisk in the *Place de la Concorde* – the Parisian square where Louis XVI was beheaded – and then notifying the press that the king's skull had reappeared (the last of these rituals was never carried out) (Stoekl, "Commentary on the Texts" *Visions* 263).

archivist by day, a pornographer and member of a secret society by night – and for his staggering transition from pious seminarian, to his rapid deconversion and subsequent transformation into a 'mystic without God.' It appears that Bataille not only underwent his own self-reassessment, but that posthumously his works have also undergone significant re-examination. In his own day, Bataille was marginalised by the Surrealists, the existentialists and the Catholics. However, his legacy lives on today. It was only when he was taken up by Foucault, and later Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and Kristeva, that Bataille's work was incorporated into postmodern thought.[7] In recent years, Bataille's work has been the subject of extensive analysis by such scholars as Benjamin Noys, Nick Land and Patrick ffrench. Since the theological turn in postmodernism, Bataille's theories have also gained a new lease of life – we need only think of the work of postmodern scholars of Christian thought John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo. Such renewed interest in the philosophy of religion, Christian apologetics, and theology has seen Bataille's work often coupled with that of René Girard, whose notions of mimetic desire/rivalry and the scapegoat

[7] While I am no doubt aware of the apparent significance that Bataille's work had for the group of theorists whom we might class as 'the poststructuralists' (Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Lacan, Blanchot, Baudrillard, and Deleuze and Guattari), as well as the importance that their critique of Bataille's thought would play in postmodernity, I will not be directly drawing from their work, and nor will I be forming an explicitly poststructuralist reading of Bataille. I realise, of course, that my argument possesses a poststructuralist bent – that I am attempting to form a non-essentialising, non-structuralist reading of sacrifice, and that accordingly neither Bataille nor I suggest that sacrifice is universal or transhistorical. However, I believe that it is also important to consider Michael Richardson's position that, while there are no doubt legitimate reasons for postmodernists and poststructuralists to see a thematic pre-figuration in Bataille's work, it would be appropriative and anachronistic to either read Bataille's thought through a postructuralist lens or to read Bataille as a poststructuralist (Richardson reminds the reader that Bataille died before structuralism had even become a methodology) (*Georges Bataille* 4-5). It is, however, also worth noting Benjamin Noys' argument that while Bataille was not a poststructuralist, he can be seen as something of an 'anachronism' – he was "thinking poststructuralism before it was even named" (*Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* 16). But for all the significance that Bataille's thought had for the poststructuralists – the one or two times that Deleuze and Guattari explicitly refer to Bataille in either *Anti-Oedipus* or *A Thousand Plateaus*, Lacan's fleeting reference to Bataille in his seventh seminar, or the scant mention that Kristeva makes of Bataille (important though it may be) in *Powers of Horror* – Richardson proposes that the only one of these figures who seems to have any real understanding of Bataille is Baudrillard (and, of all the poststructuralists, it is Baudrillard who seems to have written the most about Bataille and sacrifice). The attempt to grapple with Bataille's asystematic thought has produced something of a fragmentary (albeit understandably and perhaps necessarily fragmentary) reading of Bataille. That is, aside from the popular and predominant focus on Bataillean eroticism in the English-speaking world, the poststructuralists made their own specialized readings of Bataille: while Nancy and Blanchot write about Bataille's notion of community, Foucault focuses on Bataille's interpretation of transgression, and Kristeva, in her Lacanian exploration of the abject, examines Bataille's thoughts about heterogeneity. Indeed, perhaps one of the best resources to demonstrate the specialized readings of Bataille's theories is Botting's and Wilson's collection of essays – essays predominantly written by 'the poststructuralists' – in *Bataille: A Critical Reader*.

mechanism have greatly influenced contemporary philosophical and anthropological approaches to interpreting ritual sacrifice. Bataille's work continues to inform countless philosophical, theoretical and creative movements: Bataille has clearly influenced theorist Eugene Thacker's 2011 'horror of philosophy' series, theorist Ben Woodard's work with the notion of 'dark vitalism,' theorist Timothy Morton's 2009 creation of the concept 'dark ecology,' and the curious Romanian collective, *Bezna* (which emerged in 2013), and their theoretical/performance-based concepts of 'unsorcery' and 'dead thinking.'[8] Also indebted to Bataille are Iranian author Reza Negarestani and his 2008 essay-novel (which incorporates elements of dark ecology and dark vitalism) *Cyclonopedia*, the works of British visual artist brothers Jake and Dinos Chapman, and the 'speculative realism' movement, which emerged out of a 2007 conference that was attended by theorists Ray Brassier, Graham Harman and Quentin Meillassoux.[9] The life and work of Bataille has also become a subject of discussion in Australian media, with David Rutledge of ABC Radio National's program *Encounter* presenting various episodes that encompass Bataille's writing (often in combination with Girard's) on religion, the sacred and sacrifice.[10] Although I will not be using Bataille's notion of sacrifice to read all forms of ritualistic or religious violence in the pre-modern, modern, and postmodern worlds, it is nevertheless important to note that the language and discourse surrounding sacrifice has changed not only in modernity and postmodernity, but that it has also changed once again in light of the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in America. While an in-depth discussion of 9/11 goes beyond the scope of this dissertation, I believe that it is possible to use Bataille to investigate the multiple ways that the violence of 9/11 (and subsequent acts of terror) has been, curiously, both described as and denied the title of 'sacrifice,' and its perpetrators, 'martyrs.' Indeed, the advent of contemporary terrorism (which Saul Newman dates as 11 September 2001), and the proliferation of politically volatile terms like 'suicide bomber,' 'war on

[8] For more information consult Thacker's 2011 *In the Dust of this Planet – Horror of Philosophy, vol. 1*; see *darkecologies.com* or Woodard's 2013 *On an Ungrounded Earth: Towards a New Geophilosophy*; Morton's 2007 *Ecology Without Nature* or his 2010 *The Ecological Thought*; and *bezna.blogspot.com.au*.

[9] For more information please consult Harman's 2010 *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*.

[10] See the 2001 *Encounter* episode "Georges Bataille," and the 2014 episodes "Not Peace but a Sword," and "Are Religion and Violence Two Sides of the Same Coin?"

terror,' and 'axis of evil,' has once again brought into focus the fragility of the term 'sacrifice,' and the problematic ways of discussing the nature of a form of religious violence that is at once seemingly consigned to the past and yet which continues to assault the present.[11]

2. Sacrifice: Haunting the European Imagination

Bataille's personal fascination with sacrifice, however, didn't emerge in theoretical and cultural isolation. Among the multifarious currents of modern French thought, amid the population of atheist existentialists, and their inheritance of post-Enlightenment rationality, there was a strong neo-Catholic revival in twentieth-century France, as well as a renewed, secular interest in religion, and in sacrifice as a pre-modern practice/phenomenon.[12] It is impossible to understand why sacrifice was so central to Bataille's thought unless we understand how and why sacrifice haunted the modern European mind.[13] Yet in proposing that sacrifice 'haunts' the modern

[11] It is this very inability to consider or articulate 'sacrifice' in postmodernity (or to use the term to explain the actions of the perpetrators of 9/11), that continues to make Bataille' theory of sacrifice so significant: while there are certainly modern, postmodern and poststructuralist interpretations of sacrifice, I believe that Bataille was one of few modern theorists to take the question of sacrifice seriously. For Bataille, it seems that there is no language in our contemporary discourse to even *think* of the concept or role of sacrifice in the modern and postmodern worlds. In his discussion about terrorism (specifically, his focus on 9/11 and the post-9/11 world) in *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought* Saul Newman argues that dominant discourse and ideology have come to define the political realities of the post-9/11world (100). Newman argues that when the peoples or groups that have been designated the title 'terrorist' invoke the term 'sacrifice,' the word swiftly becomes bound up with Orientalist discourse (that is, with a paralleling of the terrorist with the 'barbarous' and the 'primitive'); with a simplistic discussion of religious fanaticism; with a diagnosis of mental or social instability (at either an individual or cultural level); or, with the argument that a certain peoples or religious group do not really 'understand' sacrifice. Newman proposes that it is therefore possible to use Bataille's notion of heterogeneity to reread both 'sacrifice' and the way that the term is used in light of 9/11, and to develop a serious discussion about the continuation and presence of sacrifice in postmodernity (111-115).

[12] Modern France was, at this time, a secular, capitalist nation, free of its older feudal and monarchical chagrins; a nation where the authority of the church had been greatly diminished.

[13] While it is certainly possible to examine Bataille's notion of sacrifice through the immanent connection that Bataille believes it shares with eroticism, I would like to propose that a historical contextualization of sacrifice in modern and postmodern thought is also necessary if we are to develop a broader and more extensive reading of Bataillean sacrifice. This contextualization is significant because Bataille so clearly draws on and uses earlier interpretations and definitions of sacrifice to shape his own (for example, he examines Mauss' and Hubert's structuralist reading of sacrifice, among others). Indeed, a historical contextualization of the writing of sacrifice brings much to an analysis of Bataille's though. Such a reading makes an example of Bataille's non-strucutralist approach to sacrifice (it is demonstrative of Bataille's own non-essentialising interpretation), and of the ways that Bataille's theory of sacrifice has been (and may be) used in both historical and contemporary discussion about sacrifice (for example we might consider Baudrillard's and Newman's interpretation of 9/11).

Through this historical contextualization I also attempt to avoid falling into the trap of only restating and rehashing what has already been written about Bataillean eroticism. I seek to avoid

mind, I am not suggesting that thinkers sought to offer an intellectual explanation of sacrifice. What emerged in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a push to develop a secularised comparison of world religions and to collect and analyse folk tales. Out of these preliminary studies and investigations into modern and pre-modern worlds and religious practices, the fields of comparative religion and anthropology were born. It was out of this sociological and anthropological context that Bataille's work emerged. At the heart of this exegesis is my contention that sacrifice was of significance to modern thinkers not only because so much of Europe was Christian, but also because so many theorists and artists identified and became fascinated with the themes and currents of sacrifice in Christianity. Consider Johannes Zachhuber's and Julia Meszaros' introduction to their 2013 anthology *Sacrifice and Modern Thought*. Sacrifice, they propose, has always preoccupied the European mind,

> partly because of its controversial assessment in Christian theology, partly because of its central importance for Greek tragedy, partly because of its evident centrality to so many different historical religions. (v)

Zachhuber and Meszaros believe that, aside from late antiquity and the modern era, there has never been more enchantment with, and motivation to explore, theories of sacrifice and the theological, ethical and social implications of religious and ritualistic violence (1). Nevertheless, the reason for the popularity of sacrifice in modern thought is "ambiguous" (2). It is a fascination that is, they say, "emblematic for modernity's general attitude to its traditional past from which it seeks to break free while being fearful, at the same time, about consequences of its potential loss" (2). Thus the fascination with and fear of sacrifice formed an ironic rift: as in the Enlightenment, the modern world attempted to break free from the pre-modern world while at the same time trying to avoid losing the energy and virility that had become associated with the pre-modern. But Zachhuber and Meszaros say that what most concerned modern theorists was the fear of and lamentation for the loss of the sacred.[14] According to Niklaus Largier in his 2009 lecture "Refiguring Religious

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suggesting that it is only possible to read Bataille (and therefore Batailean sacrifice) through his notion of eroticism. I argue that to only read Bataille through eroticism would limit Bataille's thought and would be to suggest that there is a central core to Bataille's philosophy – a limitation that Bataille certainly rejected in his quest to develop a non-specialised, non-totalising form of *non-savoir* (nonknowledge).

[14] Richard Wagner tried to capture this sense of the loss of the sacred (and the loss of community and communality) in his 1882 opera *Parsifal*. *Parsifal* concerns the quest of a brotherhood of the Holy

Experience: Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience*," the modern era witnessed the breakdown of all the structures that the Romantics had forged, namely, the idealised, romanticised image of the *Gemeinschaft* – or pre-modern life – as being a world (or '*umwelt'*), or 'community,' in which humans were embedded in nature and steeped in the sacred. Largier believes that, while ritual sacrifice binds the community to the sacred, the 'Modern Condition' constitutes the alienation from, the loss of, and nostalgia for this sense of communality and the sacred.[15] In the modern world, Largier says that we submitted ourselves to a neurotic and pathological culture where we lost not only the Dionysian, but also a form of 'virility' attributed to primordial 'man' and primordial civilisation. One of the attractions of sacrifice in the modern era was the very fact that, despite the domination of Enlightenment rationality, sacrifice signaled the survival of the so-called 'primitive' (the energy and virility attributed to the pre-modern might also explain the development of neo-primitivism or fauvism, or currents in twentieth-century classical music, like Stravinsky's 1913 *The Rite of Spring*).[16] Nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy and anthropology attempted to define sacrifice beyond the confines of Christianity and to explain its significance in other cultures. Modernist thinkers also tried to reread the crucifixion through new definitions of sacrifice, and to review Christianity in light of the development of an anthropology of religion, which involved comparative and syncretic interpretations. What is unique about Bataille's position in this framework is the curious connection he forms between the sociological and the subjective. For Bataille, as I will discuss in due course, was not only a member of the French collective the *Collège de Sociologie* (and so engaged in scientific enquiries into religion and the sacred), but also suffered a pervading sense of alienation and a perennial sense of despair at the irrevocable loss of the sacred.

Grail. In a 2013 production at Covent Garden, the 'Holy Grail' was, controversially, presented onstage, as a pre-pubescent boy, who was naked but for a loincloth. The 'drinking of the chalice' was, even more shockingly, performed through the sacrifice of the boy – like Christ, the boy was stabbed in the side. The soldiers then took turns touching and drinking from the boy's wound (White; Maddocks).

[15] It must be noted that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sociological and philosophical notions of 'the sacred' comprise a tragic vision of sacredness. 'The sacred' was not understood as something necessarily 'good,' but as something brutal and vicious that had been lost to the safety and comforts of secular bourgeoisie life.

[16] I realise that the term 'primitive' is highly problematic. By 'primitive,' I am not referring to "an early or ancient period; simple, unsophisticated, or crude things or people as a class" ("Primitive"), nor am I referring to the derogatory use of the term. Rather, I am using 'primitive' through the lens of the Enlightenment, in which the term referred to a pre-Christian world.

2.1 The Powers of Horror: Christianity, the European Imagination, and Repugnance Towards Sacrifice

> *And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain.*
>
> 1 Corinthians, 15:14, King James Bible

I have stressed the importance of contextualising Bataille's thought: that, in order to understand his stance on sacrifice we need, first, to understand the intellectual and religious background out of which he emerged. We need not only to grasp the Christian orthodoxy that he repurposes in his work, but also to comprehend the very *narrative* of sacrifice – the sacrifice of both human and God – that is at the heart of Christianity. We need, also, to consider the way that this narrative of sacrifice affected (and continues to affect) the European mind. According to religious historian Ivan Strenski, sacrifice deeply *troubles* the European imagination. There is a particular horror invested in human sacrifice that is not present in the sacrifice of objects or even of animals. It is a horror that has persisted into the present day and has retained a place in the popular imagination. There is a general consensus that human sacrifice belongs to a 'primitive' world (consider the works of Renan, Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Mauss, Hubert), and that civilisation is judged by both its disgust with and rejection of human sacrifice.[17]

Yet it may be this very link with the so-called 'primitive world,' as well as the horror aroused by the very idea of human sacrifice, that has maintained sacrifice's place in the popular imagination; we are intrigued by something so terrifying that we almost cannot speak about it.[18] In "Sacrifice as Refusal" Gavin Flood says that sacrifice confounds our sensibilities and opposes our drive to live. Sacrifice, he says, "confronts us with the naked *aporia* of human life" (*Sacrifice in Modern Thought*

[17] In a recent article in the *New York Review of* Books, Mary Beard reviews Joan Breton Connelly's 2014 book *The Parthenon Enigma*, noting her controversial reinterpretation of the central scene of the east frieze of the Parthenon. The frieze, which classicists once thought depicted the presentation of a newly woven robe to the goddess Athena, Connelly proposes, instead tells of an early Athenian myth in which an oracle has told the legendary King Erechtheus that in order to save Athens from invasion he must sacrifice one of his daughters. Connelly's and Beard's rereadings of the frieze do not simply posit that historical critics were wrong in their original interpretation of the sculpture, but rather that we need to completely revise our whole notion of the disparity between barbarism and civilisation, between primitivity and democracy.

[18] This 'unspeakable' terror of human sacrifice, has entered the realm of popular culture; for example in the form of the 1973 and 2006 remake of the film *The Wicker Man*.

115). Zachhuber and Meszaros agree, saying that the West has attempted to purge Christianity of the 'taint' of sacrifice. This attempt, to cleanse the crucifixion of its barbarity, first gained momentum during the Reformation when the Protestants argued that, because Christ's death was the one true sacrifice, Christianity had to become a non-sacrificial religion (Zachhuber and Meszaros 1). Zachhuber and Meszaros also suggest that eighteenth-century intellectuals rejected sacrifice on the basis that it was cruel, uncivilised and incompatible with religion (1). However, in "Sacrifice in Recent Roman Catholic Thought," Philip McCosker maintains: "sacrifice simply is central to Catholicism" (*Sacrifice and Modern Thought* 132). Like McCosker, Strenski, Zachhuber and Meszaros argue that it is impossible to think of the Bible (or of Abrahamic religion) without thinking of sacrifice: specifically, without thinking of *human* sacrifice: the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moria, Jephthah's daughter, Christ's crucifixion.[19]

But is it possible to think of sacrifice without thinking of Christianity? Such a question inevitably leads to the problem of whether Christianity is, at heart, a sacrificial religion, and whether the crucifixion can even be called a sacrifice. In *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* Candida Moss argues that the very term 'sacrifice' may be problematic when discussing the death of Christ and the subsequent deaths of the martyrs. "Whereas we might be tempted to use the term 'sacrifice' for martyrs as a way of communicating that they 'gave up' their lives," she says, "the same could not be said of the ancient world" (77). Moss argues that paralleling the concept of 'dying for' something with 'sacrifice' is a relatively recent association – an association that did not exist among ancient understandings of sacrifice.

The very uncertainty of what was sacrificed at the crucifixion further complicates the link between Christianity and sacrifice. It is this uncertainty that leads to the question of the nature of Christ.[20] Orthodox theology, which triumphed in the Nicene Creed (325 C.E.), demands that followers believe that Christ was both fully divine and fully human, as though cut from the same cloth as God, but sent to live and suffer like a human. Today, the Nicene Creed is always recited as part of the Christian mass (in both Catholic and Protestant churches), in which Christ, the only son of God,

[19] For a complete account of the history of human sacrifice in Abrahamic religion and the Middle East see Carol Delaney's 2000 book *Abraham on Trial: The Social Legacy of Biblical Myth*.

[20] In *Jesus Wars* Jenkins explores the theology, the accusations of heresy and the warfare that came out of religious debates like the 325 CE Council of Nicea and the 451 CE Council of Chalcedon.

is said to be "eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father" (*The Book of Common Prayer* 326). It is a declaration of faith, and a dogma that nineteenth-century and twentieth-century French liberal Protestants and Roman Catholics followed. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that all theology, and the theologising of the crucifixion, is *retrospective*. The theology of the crucifixion is, more than anything, a rationalisation of the popular mythical narrative of the dying/resurrecting god. Throughout Christian history there have been countless disputes about the nature of Christ – disputes that have led to bloodshed and accusations of heresy. While the nature of Christ is still problematic, such arguments have become arcane, outdated; a feud that 'smells of the oil lamp,' so to speak.[21] The results of these early debates, however old fashioned, clearly have implications for how people both understand and practice Christianity. In order to interpret what happened at the crucifixion, why it happened, and whether or not we can call the event a sacrifice, we must first ascertain exactly *what* was crucified. In *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* Philip Jenkins stresses the significance of this question when he asks: "how, in fact, had Christ suffered on the cross – had *God* really died?" (emphasis in original, location 82). What is so powerful about Christ's crucifixion, Jenkins says, is that according to orthodox theology it is not just a man who is killed, it is also a god – the death of God.

The debate over the nature of Christ and the subsequent theories of sacrifice that emerged out of the Nicene Creed also formed the foundations of what set the Catholics and the Protestants – like other sects of Christianity – apart.[22] For it was out of the debate about the nature of Christ that a theological dilemma arose: Eucharistic theology.[23] The nature of the Eucharist became one of the great theological disputes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with the Protestants denying the 'Real

[21] While the nature of Christ is still perplexing, what results from orthodoxy's triumph is that modern Christianity tends to emphasise Christ's humanity.

[22] The differences between the fields of theology and anthropology are here clarified: in Christianity, the issue of Christ's divine/human nature becomes a doctrinal problem, whereas in anthropology it becomes a ritualistic problem.

[23] The Eucharist is the bread and wine shared at mass, and is typically symbolic of the Last Supper that Christ shared with the Apostles before he was betrayed, imprisoned and executed. While some Lutherans and Anglicans accept the theology of consubstantiation – that the body and blood of Christ are present alongside the bread and wine, but do not *become* the bread and wine – for Catholics, the bread and wine, when consecrated, are more than just a memorial supper: they change, or *transubstantiate*, and become the Eucharist or, the *actual flesh and blood of Christ*.

Presence' of Christ in the communion wafer or wine, and the Catholics believing that they were eating the literal flesh and drinking the blood of their saviour. It is therefore fascinating that, while Catholics and Protestants remain separated on the doctrine of the Eucharist (a doctrine with which Bataille, a lapsed Catholic, was familiar), they largely cohere on the significance of the crucifixion.

"Along with the Catholics," Strenski says, "the 'orthodox' Protestants of France never ceased believing in Jesus' death as a kind of penal atonement" that was enacted "to satisfy divine anger and in expiation for human sin" (*Theology and the First Theory of Sacrifice* 69). We must, however, remember that 'penal atonement' or 'penal substitution' is a distinctly Protestant doctrine, even if it is one that shares many similarities with the Catholic notion of redemptive expiatory sacrifice. For both the Catholics and Protestants, the significance of Christ's death is in its being a substitutionary sacrifice, where Christ died for the sins of humanity, through which he effectively washed away or removed the human burden of inherited sin. For both the Catholics and Protestants, the crucifixion is an act of both redemption and atonement. For Catholics, however, the crucifixion is largely understood as an expiatory or 'propitiatory' sacrifice – a sacrifice in which divine retribution is avoided through an act of atonement. Curiously, the theology of expiation came under both Catholic and Protestant scrutiny in the twentieth century, where it was criticised as being both needlessly violent and in opposition to civic and moral forms of sacrifice. Nevertheless, Strenski argues that the Catholic Eucharistic version of sacrifice demands, to this day, the fulfillment of two elements: the total annihilation (or death) of the victim, and the expiation of sin, which was brought about through the immolation of the victim (*Theology* 35). The first element, the victim's total annihilation, can be found in the Catholic narrative of the crucifixion, where sacrifice is extreme and uncompromising: there is nothing partial about it (*Theology* 36).

According to Nicene orthodoxy, the crucifixion is the means by which Christ paid off the debt of sin that humanity had accumulated since the fall of Adam.[24] This 'payment' was not only a metaphorical means of washing away the sins of humanity (of being washed in the blood of the lamb), but also acted as a paradoxical form of manumission: for while the faithful are freed from their sin debt, they become a slave

[24] In his 2009 book *Sin: A History* Gary Anderson proposes that the crucifixion functioned as a 'sin offering.' While sin was originally seen as a weight or a burden, such a metaphor is, Anderson says, now out-dated. He argues that sin is now understood as a debt that is to be repaid or remitted by God.

of the Lord.[25] This belief is put forward in Corinthians: "For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave" (7:22). At the same time, ironically, believers are freed by and yet also become a slave to Christ (Christ also declares *himself* a slave). They are freed, metaphorically, from their positions as slaves, although they are not freed literally. In Christian orthodoxy, therefore, the crucifixion is 'good' because, even though it demanded Christ's suffering (which is 'evil'), it was a salvific moment that opened the gates of heaven – because Christ atoned for our sins, the believer is saved (given salvation).[26] According to the catechisms of the Catholic Church, the believers' "salvation flows from God's initiative of love for us, because 'he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins,'" ("Part One: The Profession of Faith"). Thus the church explained expiation as a sign of love and compassion. Both Strenski and Moss have argued that, for Catholics, Christ's death is understood as 'settling a score,' as repaying a cosmic sin-debt, as appeasing godly wrath, and as 'paying with blood' (Strenski, *Theology* 35-39; Moss, *The Other Christs* 77).

Despite the efforts of twentieth-century Christianity to 'clean up' the blood and brutality and expiatory nature of the crucifixion, it is worth noting, as Moss and Jenkins have, that the image of the martyr has persisted in Catholicism, not least because the martyr's death mimics Christ's, but because the martyr becomes *another* Christ (Moss, *The Other Christs* 77; Jenkins, page 8, location 351). In *The Amazing Colossal Apostle* Robert M. Price says that, at its core, Christianity relies on the narrative of the sacrifice, death and rebirth of the god. Price maintains that, without this link between God and sacrifice, the fundamental values of Christianity could not and would not make any sense. There is a general consensus among most Christian sects that there is a link between the Christian God and sacrifice. However, the significance and 'ways of seeing' the sacrifice are not the same among all sects: while iconography, the importance of Christ's wounds, and the stations of the cross are all central to Catholicism, Protestants regard these icons as little more than superstitious adornments. But the significance of martyrdom in the Catholic tradition, Moss says, is that their deaths are not a new and original phenomenon, but rather, "[their] sacrifice

[25] See Revelation 7:14: "And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

[26] Today, however, there is a wider spectrum of belief. While Catholics might believe that their god died on the cross, there is a hesitation in calling Christ's death an expiatory sacrifice because of the negative, barbaric, and 'primitive' implications of the 'blood debt' sacrifice.

appears to be a repetition and a commemoration of the original sacrifice of the god" (89).

Though the nature of Christ, the importance of Real Presence, the death of God, and the significance of the crucifixion may seem tangential to my broader research, this theological investigation is directly relevant to my work because of the continued centrality of sacrifice in both Catholic and Protestant Christianity. I aim to show that, while these debates about Christ emerged centuries ago, the debate is never quite over. While Christ's death is, in Catholic Eucharistic theology, called the 'one true sacrifice,' his death is repeated constantly through the Catholic mass. Both Strenski and Moss posit that the language and narrative of sacrifice are at the centre of the Catholic mass, which is based on the Eucharist. Philip McCosker says that the proceedings of Jesus' Paschal Mystery – the Last Supper, his crucifixion, and his resurrection – are the essence of the Catholic faith, and that believers replay this mystery through the mass (132). Through their participation in the communion meal, the faithful are made 'holy' – an interesting link to the etymology of the term 'sacrifice.' Strenski says that in Catholic theology the mass represents the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that, while Christ's death on the cross is understood as the 'one true sacrifice,' the mass perpetuates his death and makes it ever-present (*Theology* 39).

It is the ever-present nature of Christ's crucifixion that informs Moss' work on Christ, martyrdom and sacrifice. In *The Other Christs*, Moss poses two questions: what does it mean for the uniqueness of Christ's death if there were imitators whose deaths achieve similar outcomes? And, is it conceivable that some ancient Christians understood Christ's death as the *first*, rather than the *only* true sacrifice? (Moss 77). While the first of these questions is answered through Moss' exploration of Eucharistic theology, both of these questions were debated in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French intellectual spheres. The significance of such questions emerged alongside the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French obsession with invoking the images of martyrs, saints and mystics to provoke political and social reform. Indeed, the French fascination with martyrology and mysticism persisted not only among the religious (Simone Weil, for instance), but also among secular and atheist thinkers (Simone de Beauvoir, for example) who not only used the image of the saint and the martyr, and the significance of the saint and martyr, as one who suffers *for* God, to call for revisions within the church and to protest war, but also

equated Medieval female Christian mystics with feminism and gender equality movements.[27]

2.2 *La séparation des Églises et de l'État*: Sacrifice in Twentieth-Century French Political and Christian Thought

The significance of sacrifice (in the forms of martyrdom and mysticism) among religious and secular French thinkers is unsurprising for Strenski, who believes that sacrifice is particularly salient in modern French thought. In *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism and Social Thought in France*, Strenski charts the French obsession with sacrifice from its origins in the early seventeenth century, where, in response to the Protestant Reformation, French Catholic theology attempted to offer a new theory of Catholic sacramental sacrifice. He contends that sacrificial imagery went on to characterise the French Revolution, the Dreyfus Affair, and France's involvement in World Wars I and II (*Contesting Sacrifice* 3). And it was during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he says, that Catholic theology became so entrenched in French thought that it came to be the point of reference for all contemplation on sacrifice (49). In *Contesting Sacrifice*, Strenski reasons that the Catholic vision of sacrifice was so embedded in French culture that it even shaped French political thought (6). While French thought adopted the Catholic view of sacrifice, there was a challenge to doctrine, which emanated from French Liberal Protestant thought (which was antagonistic to Catholic doctrine). The Protestants, who believed that French universities were clerical institutions, dominated the academic realm, their attempt to theorise the crucifixion falling under the category of what they called 'Christian Science.'[28] While the purpose and function of the university had been a matter of debate since the eighteenth century (consider Kant and the university metaphysicians), and universities had become increasingly secularised over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Strenski says that the Liberal Protestants

[27] In her 2002 work *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Amy Hollywood argues that the fascination with martyrdom and medieval mysticism that interested otherwise secular and atheist French theorists including Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Hèléne Cixous, and Simone Weil was predominantly an interest in gender and feminism (de Beauvoir and Irigaray, she says, focused on the mystical association with women, and what it meant that most medieval mystics were women – people like Angela de Foligno and Teresa of Avilia).

[28] According to Strenski, the French liberal Protestants did not distinguish science from theology but rather saw the two as leading to union with God (*Theology* 9).

didn't see their religious affiliation as divorced from secular investigations into religion.

Yet we must keep in mind that whatever dominant position the Church might have had in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France (civically, institutionally (in universities), and scientifically) this position would come under fire after December 1905. The 1905 *Séparation des Églises et de l'État* (Separation of the Church and State) was a French law that effectively put an end to the funding of religious groups by the state and, as Marcel Fournier says, put the teaching of religious science (essentially, theology) "in jeopardy when faculties of protestant theology were eliminated in 1906" (133).[29]

In the modern era, sacrifice also took on a nationalistic quality – sacrificing oneself for the good of one's nation became a popular mode of understanding sacrifice, and with this mentality came the formation of 'brotherhoods' where people were willing to 'die for the cause.'[30] Sacrifice therefore became a way for both the individual and the state to make sense of war. The implication of sacrifice, nationalism and militarism is the subject of Jesse Goldhammer's 2005 *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*, in which Goldhammer argues that, from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, the French linked war and revolution with the founding violence of Roman and Christian myths. He proposes that the French Revolutionaries not only saw their actions as comparable to Romulus' killing of Remus or Christ's crucifixion but that French theorists of the twentieth century (people like Joseph de Maistre, Georges Sorel, and even Georges Bataille) also interpreted the revolutionaries' actions as sacrificial. Because of the sacrificial rhetoric employed in these explosive historical moments, Strenski finds it unsurprising that sacrifice fascinated modern French theorists. However, he maintains that this interest only exposed the problematic nature of sacrifice: beyond the ethical dilemmas raised by ritualistic killing was the problem of theorising sacrifice itself.

[29] While it is unclear whether Mauss and Hubert played any part in the discussion surrounding this law, Durkeheim for one is known to have taken an active role. In a 1905 debate about the law, Durkehim explicitly voiced his opinion of Christianity saying that "[f]rom a sociological viewpoint, the Church is a monstrosity" (11).

[30] This attitude characterised not only modern France, but also modern Europe (Nazi Germany was, of course, its disastrous climax).

2.3 "These good, but badly informed souls": Secular Anthropology and the Task of Defining Sacrifice

In *Theology and the First Theory of Sacrifice* Strenski argues that there still remains no consistent or totally persuasive definition of 'sacrifice.' For, while we can speak of sacrifice in terms of ritualistic immolation, today the term is more commonly invoked metaphorically and secularly: we speak of civic or social sacrifice, sacrifice in war, or sacrifice in interpersonal relationships (Strenski, *Theology* 1). Philip McCosker agrees, aptly stating: "like the category of 'religion,' there is no one universally functional definition of sacrifice" (133). For Strenski, sacrifice has "fallen on hard times": it is a word that is at once heroic and yet repellant (*Theology* 1). Sacrifice has gained a bad reputation, not only because, in the post-Enlightenment attempt to explain the 'savage mind,' it has been associated with 'the primitive,' but also because of its connection with war.[31] How, Strenski asks, can we speak of a concept that overshadows Western history (it appears in Abrahamic religion, in Greek and Roman history and myth) when we cannot use the term consistently? Clearly, the metaphorical use of the term 'sacrifice' to describe interpersonal relationships in the twenty-first century is a far cry from the so-called 'disturbing' and 'primitive' bloody sacrifices of the Ancient Aztecs. Although the etymology of 'sacrifice' – *sacer* meaning 'sacred' or 'holy' or 'religious' – doesn't help us explain modern uses of the term, this etymology is integral to Strenski, when he discusses what he sees as the first real theory of sacrifice; what he sees as the first *definitive* theory to emerge out of either religious or secular enquiry.[32]

According to Strenski, the first serious effort to define and theorise sacrifice was the work of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French sociologists Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert. Strenski says that their 1899 work of comparative anthropology, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, can be called the first theory of sacrifice, not least because it is a full-length enquiry into the subject, and remains the

[31] Indeed, the connection between war and sacrifice has never really gone away – 'The Holocaust,' for example, no doubt refers to the mass genocide of six-million Jews during World War II (although in Hebrew, the Holocaust is referred to as *Shoah* or 'catastrophe' or 'calamity') but it is also a term that, Biblically, refers to a sacrifice in which an offering is "consumed by fire; a whole burnt offering" ("Holocaust").

[32] I am aware that the definition of 'religion' is also problematic, but for the purpose of this exegesis I will adopt Émile Durkheim's definition of religion which appears in his 1912 work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, because it aligns with my interest in anthropology and sociology. In *Religious Life*, Durkheim says that religion: "is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to *sacred things*, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden" (47).

most influential work ever written about the topic (*Theology* 19). Through their secular approach to theorising and defining sacrifice, Mauss and Hubert steer clear of restricting the study of sacrifice to discussions about the 'primitive,' and instead attempt to study it as an objective phenomenon. The sociologists also avoided condemning religion and sacrifice, instead working to understand the significance and function of religious violence in the development of human civilisation. Such is the intention of Bataille, who, like Mauss and Hubert does not try to occlude or erase the violent origins or religions the way that religions do themselves.

While Mauss and Hubert signpost a single definition of sacrifice, Nick Allen argues that Mauss and Hubert in fact offer *two* different, although complementary, definitions ("Using Hubert and Mauss to Think About Sacrifice" 155). The first definition – the definition that Mauss and Hubert flag as their *only* definition – describes sacrifice as "a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or of certain objects in which that person is interested" (*Sacrifice* 13). What makes a sacrifice a sacrifice is the making holy, the consecrating, of the victim – an action that reflects the etymology of sacrifice.[33] By this definition, Allen maintains that Mauss and Hubert understand sacrifice as a religious act where (although they do not use the term 'destruction'), the destruction of the victim is the means by which the victim is consecrated. Something is then imparted to the spectators through the victim's oblation. The victim of the sacrifice, according to Mauss and Hubert, can be plant, animal or human (*Sacrifice* 151-155).

The second definition – the definition that Allen suggests is the stronger of the two – is found in Mauss' and Hubert's conclusion, where they contend that sacrifice

> consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed. (*Sacrifice* 97)

[33] It is important to clarify just what Mauss and Hubert mean by 'consecration,' especially if we are to differentiate it from the term 'sacrifice.' According to Mauss and Hubert: "sacrifice always implies a consecration; in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious domain; it is consecrated" (9). They propose that the transformative nature of death in sacrifice 'sacralises' the victim and extends this sense of consecration – this connection with the world of the sacred – onto the spectators of the sacrifice.

This definition, Allen argues, better expresses the nature and function of sacrifice because it refers to the *procedure* by which a victim is used to establish communication between the realms of the sacred and profane (155). In exploring the nature and function of sacrifice, Mauss and Hubert employ Durkheim's definitions of the 'sacred' and the 'profane.' Durkheim's definitions of the sacred and the profane were inextricably linked to his theory of religion, and he explored all three concepts in his 1912 work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In *Religious Life* Durkheim says that all religious thought divides the sacred from the profane (37). The sacred is that which represents the unity and strength of the community, the profane being that which represents individuality.[34] This sacred/profane dichotomy clarifies Durkheim's conviction that at its core, religion is a social (communal, and therefore sacred) tool that maintains cohesion between and control over the (profane) individuals within a society. When Durkheim says that "sacred things are simply collective ideals" ("The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions" 159), he is arguing that, if individuals are left to their own devices, their beliefs will falter – what is needed to strengthen and maintain the beliefs of individuals is community and society. Religion, for Durkheim, is the 'glue' that holds society and culture together. A division between the concepts of the sacred and the profane, Durkheim argues, manifests itself through a hierarchy of objects, where the sacred object is ranked higher than the profane object, for example in the way that a chalice might be removed from the world of the profane, sanctified and dedicated to sacred wine. Following Durkheim, Hubert and Mauss believe that every sacrifice demands this movement from the profane to the sacred. They also contend that sacrifice is necessarily a religious task. It is a task that, at its core, is concerned with the unification of a community through the communication between what they call the '*sacrifier*' – the spectators, the *desirers*, of the sacrifice – and the victim, and the communication between the profane and the sacred:

> The purpose of the whole rite is to increase the religiosity of the sacrifier. To this end he had to be associated as closely as possible with the victim, because it is thanks to the strength that the act of consecration has built up in the victim that he acquires this desired

[34] It is important to note that, for Durkheim, 'individual' does not mean the same as "a single person or thing; or some one member of a class" ("Individual"), but rather refers to a being that is separated, alienated, or isolated from others.

> characteristic. In this case, we may say that the characteristic whose transmission is the very aim of the sacrifice *passes from the victim to the sacrifier*. (Durkheim, *Religious Life*, emphasis in original 52)

For Allen, and, it would seem for Mauss and Hubert, the sacrificial victim's consecration and subsequent destruction are the two most significant elements of the sacrificial ceremony, not only because such ceremonial violence allows the victim to move from the realm of the profane to the world of the sacred, but because the destruction of the victim allows the spectators (the sacrifier), who belong to the realm of the profane, to commune with the world of the sacred.

While Mauss' and Hubert's intention in *Sacrifice* is to define the nature and social function of sacrifice, they also admit that defining sacrifice is not only problematic, but that their definition will not encompass all cases because of variations of sacrificial practices and their multiple meanings in different cultures and eras (*Sacrifice* 19). Theirs is not a totalising definition, but it is, they assert, broader than the Catholic notion of expiatory or Eucharistic sacrifice. It is through this definition, they say, that they hope to glean the essential human nature, or human *qualities*, of sacrifice. Mauss and Hubert also concede that, while sacrifice doesn't appear in all cultures (for example, they say that there are no sacrifices in Australian Aboriginal cultures), sacrifice isn't a religious phenomenon confined to Europe. Thus their work is filled with instances of sacrificial practices in Hindu, Vedic, Ancient Greek and Roman, Jewish, Mexican and Christian cultures.

Although extrapolating a single definition of sacrifice from a global practice may seem a daunting task, this is exactly what Mauss and Hubert do in creating their theory of ritual sacrifice. Here I say 'ritual sacrifice' rather than 'human' or 'animal' sacrifice, because Mauss and Hubert believe that victims are defined by their 'victimisation'; by their destruction rather than by their nature (*Sacrifice* 12). Thus, they claim that a sacrificial victim can be anything from plants, food, animals or humans, so long as it is destroyed in a sacrificial ceremony, a ceremony that is both ritualistic and a public spectacle (12). The sacrificial ceremony, they say, involves three major players: first, the *sacrifier*, or the individual, the family or the crowd who gain something from the sacrifice (the sacrifier belong(s) to the realm of the profane and gains momentary admission into the world of the sacred through the destruction of the victim). Second, they define the *sacrifice* as the priest or official executioner who is the link between the sacred and the profane worlds. Third, the *victim*, or that

which, through being destroyed, binds the sacred with the sacrifier. Mauss and Hubert argue that in sacrifice the victim and sacrifier fuse through the victim's destruction, and it is their destruction (for example, the desecration of sacred plants or objects, or the victim's death) that restores a divine principle. This 'divine principle,' according to Mauss and Hubert, is found in ritual sacrifices that involve the victim's death, where the victim's most sacred possession – their life – is imprisoned in their (profane) body, and it is only through death that their (sacred) spirit is released into the world. This release restores communication between the realms of the sacred and the profane, and between the victim and the spectators (19-45).

While cultural and political notions of sacrifice in modern France were largely informed by the Catholic notions of Eucharistic and expiatory sacrifice, or the Protestant branch of 'Christian Science,' Mauss and Hubert believed that neither sect's interpretation of sacrifice was more convincing than the other's. Strenski tells us that this "motley" group of "agnostics, atheists and rationalists" (the sociologists) relished in provoking their religious opponents (*Theology* 10, 20). In one 1898 letter, Hubert, referring to their intentions with their then-upcoming publication *Sacrifice*, wrote to Mauss saying that:

> We shouldn't miss a chance to make trouble for these good, but badly informed souls [the Christian theologians]. Let's stress the direction of our work, let's be clear about our aims so that they are pointed, sharp like razors, and so that they are treacherous. Let's go! I love a fight! That's what excites us! (Qtd. in Strenski, *Theology* 20)[35]

It was these *badly informed souls*, namely, the Protestants, that Mauss and Hubert believed had no right to call their investigations into sacrifice and the crucifixion 'scientific' (Strenski, *Theology* 11). The sociologists felt that despite the Protestants' "sincere intentions," their attempt to scientifically theorise sacrifice "turned out to be more confessional and theological than universally human" (11).

But the sociologists didn't simply reject what they saw as the quasi-scientific Protestant *method* of enquiry into sacrifice, they also disagreed with the Christian *theology* of sacrifice. In "The Sacrifice of God," Mauss and Hubert say "it is in the

[35] For Strenski, what was also so daring about Mauss' and Hubert's *sacrifice* was that it "was one of the first shots fired across the bow of the Protestant dominance of the "science *religieuse'*"" (*Theology* 30).

sacrifice of the divine personage that the idea of sacrifice attains its highest expression" (*Sacrifice* 77). That is, beyond the horror of animal sacrifice, beyond the extremity of human sacrifice even, is the supreme sacrifice of the god: something so powerful that it has, Mauss and Hubert say, been the cataclysmic point on which countless religions have based their origin stories. Mauss and Hubert believed that, as in the Christian tradition, there were countless cases of the sacrifice of a god, in which a human takes on the role of the victim-deity. While a human victim may be sacrificed, "it is still the god who undergoes the sacrifice; he [sic] is not a mere character in it" (*Sacrifice* 88). Thus Mauss and Hubert contend that to overlook the connection between a god and a sacrifice is to drain the sacrifice of power and significance. This, as we shall see, is a position that Bataille would go on to contest in his own theory of sacrifice. Yet in order for a god to be sacrificed, Mauss and Hubert say that many religions have held that the god must first "descend to the role of a victim" (77); must, in the case of Christ, take on a human form.

Mauss and Hubert also reject the Catholic notions of Eucharistic and expiatory sacrifice. They argue that, in contrast to the Catholic belief that sacrifice is a 'giving up' of the self, sacrifice is instead a 'giving of.' While they believe that sacrifice demands 'destruction,' they don't believe that total annihilation or death, as is the demand in Catholic sacrifice, is at the heart of sacrifice. Mauss and Hubert voice their position in *Sacrifice* when they say that the "sacrifier gives up something of himself but he does not give himself" (100). Their stance on sacrifice also rejects the Catholic requirement of expiation, for, according to Mauss and Hubert, expiation alone does not function as a "real type of sacrifice" (*Sacrifice* 14). Mauss and Hubert argue that expiation is only an occasional *factor* in sacrifice and not at the very heart of sacrifice.

But perhaps their boldest argument against the Christian interpretation of sacrifice was Mauss' and Hubert's questioning whether Christ's crucifixion was a sacrifice *at all*. Durkheim, Mauss and Hubert believed that Christ's death at Calvary was no more than a representation or idea of what a perfect sacrifice could be: it was a blueprint, a model of sacrifice that was built on older traditions of sacrifice (Strenski, *Theology* 52). Mauss and Hubert, who understood the allegorical implications, and the literary, mythic and *literal* qualities of sacrifice, would have come to this conclusion through their reading of the first chapter of Sir James Frazer's 1890 *The Golden Bough*. In the chapter "The King of the Wood," Frazer outlines the

mythological trope of the king who dies for the sake of his people, who then resurrects or is replaced by a worthy rival who continues the king's legacy. Frazer sees the death and rebirth of the 'king' (that is, God) as allegorical, whereas in Christianity the death and rebirth of the 'king' must be literal. Frazer claims that this allegory was popular in many mythical, legendary, and religious stories and was not unique to Christianity.

3. Assenting to Life, up to the Point of Death: An Introduction to Bataille and Sacrifice

While the sociologists and anthropologists tried to decentre Catholic theology from public discourse about sacrifice, and while the Catholics maintained that their visions of expiation and Eucharistic theology were unique, the residual impact of the sociologists and the Catholics went on to inform new thinkers and new theories of ritual sacrifice. It was out of their combative positions that French philosopher Georges Bataille developed his theory of sacrifice. What makes Bataille an apostate figure for my study is that the proposals that I have just made – of the sociological and Christian interpretations of sacrifice, of the sacred/profane dichotomy, and of the significance of sacrifice in modern French thought – all coalesce in his work. For Strenski, "[c]ontrary to what one might conclude from his well-deserved reputation as a pornographer, Georges Bataille really fits nicely into a tradition of French Catholic religious thought about religious sacrifice" (*Theology* 33). Bataille fits so well into this discussion because although he was invested in the sociological and anthropological enquiry into sacrifice: he wrote on Mauss' notions of 'the gift' and 'potlatch,' and he went on to form the *Collège de Sociologie*, and he also worked to reevaluate classic Catholic notions of sacrifice.[36, 37] Bataille's experience of growing up with France's Catholic cultural inheritance (as well as his own, for Bataille

[36] Potlatch is a Native American practice where objects are exchanged in a unique form of gift-giving. In potlatch, rival forces give 'gifts' to opposing sides. Every gift that is given must be returned in some way so that there is a perpetual cycle of exchanges. Sometimes the return must be of equal value, and other times the return must be of greater value. Bataille clarifies that this gift-giving ceremony also possesses a sacrificial element, in which the 'giver' demonstrates their wealth by willfully destroying their own possessions in front of their rival.

[37] The *Collège de Sociologie* was a small group of French intellectuals who met between 1937-39. Members included Bataille, Callois, and Klossowski, among others. The sociologists' discussion, which revolved around the sacred, ritual, sacrifice and communal experience, informed their positions on French politics, war, religion and the growing menace of fascism (1). For more information refer to Michèle H. Richman's 2002 *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie*; Denis Hollier's 1988 *The College of Sociology 1937-39*; or Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's 2011 *Rethinking the Political: The Sacred, Aesthetic Politics and the Collège de Sociologie*.

converted to Catholicism at seventeen only to suffer a deconversion a year later) is something that he worked within. It is the combination of this Catholic cultural inheritance *as well as* his sociological inheritance that allowed Bataille to develop a new approach to the interpretation of sacrifice. Bataille, I believe, is indebted to both his religious and secular forebears and contemporaries, without which his theory of sacrifice would not work. For it was across this religious/secular divide that Bataille developed a theory and practice in which he attempted to reinvigorate the significance of sacrifice without relinquishing the Christian God or any other god. Thus Bataille's approach both to his writing and his very life isn't secular: the secular and the religious were held in productive tension rather than blended.

Bataille was aware that the term 'sacrifice' does not possess a routine or singular definition because of the countless possible variations of sacrifice. Whatever orthodoxy or religious doctrine may say, when theorists of comparative religion investigated sacrifice, they found no standard definition. Sacrifice is associated with certain rituals and has many motives and functions, but there is no singular function of sacrifice. But whatever form it takes, and for whatever purpose, sacrifice inevitably requires the following of rules. Across different cultures and societies, sacrifice tends to incorporate people of religious authority and so, whatever purpose it serves or ritual it follows, sacrifice can be regarded as a form of religious violence, even if not all forms of religious violence are necessarily sacrificial.

It was this very connection between sacrifice and religious violence or, we might say, the religious narrative of a sacrificial death as securing life, that made sacrifice so significant for Bataille. According to Tiina Arppe, Bataille saw sacrifice as "a means of sharing the experience of death which constitutes the repulsive core of human community" (31). Bataille, Arppe believes, takes a phenomenological approach to his reading of sacrifice. Bataille believed that the exacerbation of humanity's repulsive, violent, core (in the form of the spectacle or festival of sacrifice) also allowed people to momentarily break free from their mundane existence. This momentary explosion of violence in the otherwise utter monotony of everyday life was never more important, Bataille believed, than in the modern world where, because of the triumph of the bourgeoisie and bourgeois Christianity, people had lost their connection with an older, primordial world. Bataille also uses his investigation into sacrifice as a way of explaining the origins of human civilisation, culture and society. Thus it was possible for Bataille, even as an atheist, to value

sacrifice: he understood sacrifice as a form of excess and therefore in opposition to modern capitalism (although in postmodernity the relationship that he saw as existing between excess and capitalism would change); he believed that like religion it needed to be explained; it functioned as a peculiar and specific form of religious violence; he believed that it signaled the survival of the pre-modern world while nevertheless remaining central to modern Christianity; but he believed that the Christian attempt to explain sacrifice was a failure; and he believed that sacrifice was a way of renewing modern life because it was, paradoxically, the most definitive aspect of being alive: it was a confrontation with death.[38]

3.1 The Fundamentals of Bataillean Sacrifice: Modern Life, Individuation, and Religion

We know that Bataille, like Mauss and Hubert, subscribed to the etymological origins of 'sacrifice,' which he says in his essay "The Notion of Expenditure" is "nothing other than the production of sacred things" (*Visions of Excess* 119). Jesse Goldhammer argues that Bataille's view of sacrifice changed before and after World Wars I and II, supporting my view that Bataille never stopped thinking about sacrifice all his life.[39] It is also worth noting that before he attended the seminary Bataille was conscripted for service in World War I.[40] While I will say more in due course about his involvement with and position on war, and the links he draws between war and sacrifice, it is important to note that Bataille theorists (among them, Surya, Noys and Hegarty) believe that Bataille saw war, although catastrophic and disastrous, as a sign of the horrific violence inherent in humans.

Though Goldhammer is correct – that Bataille's vision of sacrifice changed between the wars and over the course of his life – for obvious reasons I will not cover every avenue of Bataille's theory of sacrifice in this exegesis. I will begin by asking what Bataille understood as the *nature* of sacrifice. According to Bataille, sacrifice

[38] Benjamin Noys, among others (Jean-Joseph Goux, Fred Botting and Scott Wilson), proposes that Bataille's critique of twentieth-century capitalism does not reflect twenty-first century capitalism. Bataille, Noys says, could only write about *his* experience of capitalism – he could not have predicted the ways that capitalism shifted and changed in postmodernity (*Georges Bataille: An Introduction* 118). I will say more about the critiques of Bataille's interpretation of capitalism in due course.

[39] Before World War II, Bataille believed that the modern incarnation of sacrifice could be found in what he referred to as the 'waste products' of eroticism, literature and laughter, whereas after the war, Bataille applied his pre-war notion of sacrifice to what Goldhammer sees as utilitarian projects – the Marshall Plan, and the prevention of nuclear war (*Headless* 153-54).

[40] Bataille never fought, but was sent home after developing tuberculosis.

above all is violent, as it was in Christian, Roman and 'primitive' societies. However, unlike the sacrificial violence in these societies, Bataille resists attempts in the present to consign sacrifice to the past (or to an exclusively 'primordial world'). In an effort to overcome the loss of sacrifice and the sacred in the modern world, Bataille seeks to disrupt secular bourgeois values that he believes leads to the loss of the sacred.

The significance of sacrifice, for Bataille, was its power: its ability to overturn and overthrow the humdrum everyday life that had emerged out of the triumph of the middle class in the nineteenth-century. The bourgeoisie privileged (and fantasised about) a world of security and rationality, of economic and financial stability, as well as moral and ethical decency. In his 1986 work *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, French Jesuit and theorist Michel de Certeau tracks the origins of the bourgeoisie and rationality in modern society. He argues that, in order for a society to be 'rational' or 'modern,' it must be populated by individualists: individualism de Certeau says, "was born with modernity itself" (209). While individualism is the very mark of the bourgeois, it might not be immediately clear just how the individualism of the bourgeois is connected to this discussion of sacrifice. It is important to recall Durkheim's discussion on pre-modern religion and society, and his belief that individualism was tied up with the profane, whereas the community's sense of communality are bound up with the sacred (where the strength of the religion and the conviction in belief reside in communality, and the unification of a community was secured at an enormous social cost). It is fascinating that this sense of separation would be of such significance to Bataille; Bataille, who went on to claim that individuation was one of the most crippling forces of modern society, and that it was only through the decimating horrors of sacrifice that we could hope to pierce our 'individuality' – that is, the isolating prison of the self – and communicate openly and sincerely with one another. It must be made clear, of course, that Bataille isn't supporting the quasi-religious interpretation of sacrifice that a nation like France (among others) adopted during World War I.[41]

According to David Krell, Bataille's rejection of secular modern society is not only a rejection of the modern world's attempts both to control the natural world

[41] It must also be made clear that, while Bataille's fascination with sacrifice, which was perhaps at its highest during both World Wars I and II, saw him ostracised from an intellectual community that opposed war and, on occasion, saw Bataille's contemporaries mistakenly label him as a Nazi-sympathiser, Bataille, in actuality, opposed both wars and was vehemently anti-Fascist. I will discuss this further in due course.

and yet also remove humans from the natural world (to form a rational, calculating society), but is a rejection of modern society's distancing itself from (or overcoming of) older religious and sacred worlds (ix). Bataille believed that even the church wasn't exempt from the secularising modern world: Christianity, he argued, had become the religion of the bourgeoisie, the religion of the middle class. In modernity, Bataille felt that Christianity had gradually shifted from a religion represented by a wrathful god who demanded blood, sacrifice and expiation, to a merciful religion, where, to foreshadow the significance of Nietzsche's belief that Christianity was the religion of the weak, Christ's meekness trumped violence, where depictions of sacrifice were no longer horrific but were now seemingly clean and bloodless. It is important to keep in mind that Bataille never suggests that Christianity has 'gone away,' but rather that modern Christianity – the Christianity of the bourgeoisie – has distanced itself from its sacrificial, mythical origins.[42]

And if *this* was the fate of Bataille's era – the disenchantment of the world, the rationalisation and calculation of society, the absence of myth – then it was a fate that was, as Bataille saw it, terribly boring. Bataille, who seems to have developed a nostalgic view of early Christianity, was bored by the bourgeoisie. In his introduction to Bataille's 1945 work *On Nietzsche*, Sylvère Lotringer says that boredom characterised much of Bataille's early adult life (viii). Because of their obsession with comfort and their pursuit of an unchallenging, risk-free, constraining and restraining life, the bourgeoisie rejected Bataille's fundamental requirement for communication: that to connect or communicate with others demanded that one put oneself at risk.[43]

Bataille actively opposed the safety and comfort of modern life: he lived his resistance not only through his frequenting of brothels and bars, but also through his creation of the secret society *Acéphale* and his plans to stage a ritual human sacrifice. What characterises Bataille's life and work is his emotional investment in his theory and fiction; his drive to 'live out' and experience the very concepts that he worked

[42] In an instance that is startlingly reminiscent of Nietzsche's death of God thesis, Bataille proposes that, in secularised modernity, we suffer the 'absence of myth.' It is possible, of course, to historically and intellectually locate Bataille's ideas, for Bataille it seems developed his declaration of the death of myth out of Max Weber's 1917 proclamation that: "[t]he fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (Weber qtd. in Koshul 11-12).

[43] Consider Christopher Forth's work on masculinity, civilisation, and the modern west. Forth explores the common apprehension that idealised masculinity cannot persist in modernity, where a general softening and feminising of society has replaced the primal brutality of masculinity in the past (be this a true or a false impression of the past), where forests and mountains and savagery have been replaced by cities, politeness, and the pursuit of comfort.

with. Although Bataille knew that it wasn't possible to carry out ritual sacrifices in the modern world, he nevertheless believed that sacrifice was one way of escaping bourgeois life.[44] It was this very drive to overcome the 'safe distance' that separated theory from practice that led Bataille to reassess the theorists who had originally informed his work. In a 1939 letter to friend and fellow philosopher, Michel Leiris, Bataille expresses his feelings of disillusionment, not only with nineteenth-century anthropologists and sociologists, but also with the *Collège de Sociologie*. Bataille says that, while he is compelled to practice his theory, such motivations stand in direct contrast with the rules of Durkehim, Mauss and Hubert, who abided by the "rules of sociological methodology that exclude lived experience as the basis of analysis" (Bataille, *Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris: Correspondence* 128).

Yet Bataille's rejection of the scientific method didn't mean that the Christian theology that informed his theory triumphed. Although Bataille's theory is no doubt primed by his time at the seminary, we mustn't suppose that for Bataille sacrifice *demands* the annihilation of the victim as it did for the Catholics. While Strenski is right to say that Bataille's view of sacrifice, like the Catholics', "runs to the extreme" (*Theology* 55), it is important to stress that, although Bataille explicitly states that "[t]he principle of sacrifice is destruction" (*Theory of Religion* 43), he goes on to clarify that "the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about *is not annihilation*" (my emphasis 43).[45] That is: "[k]illing in the literal sense is not necessary" (45).

According to Bataille, it would be wrong to assume that the *only* violence in sacrifice is the execution. Instead, Bataille believed that the violence of sacrifice emerges out of the community's collective horror at their *desire* for sacrifice. In "The Phaedra Complex" Bataille says that "[i]t is obviously the combination of abhorrence and desire that gives the sacred world its paradoxical character" (*Accursed Share Vol. II and III* 95). Thus the sensation of the sacred which, in Bataille's system, is brought about through sacrifice, is the sensation of an ambivalent, simultaneous and *violent*

[44] Bataille is, however, vulnerable to a critique of modernity. As I have said, Bataille lived out his resistance through attending brothels and bars. And, while he may have contemplated the possibility of staging a ritual sacrificice, Hegarty reminds us that Bataille: "does not propose a return to human sacrifice" (45).

[45] Bataille offers a beautiful clarification of this when he compares sacrifice to the experience of standing at a great height: "We draw near to the void, but not in order to fall into it. We want to be intoxicated with vertigo, and the image of the fall suffices for this" (*Accursed Share Vol. II and III* 109). That is, the *image* or the apprehension of the fall will suffice rather than the *actual* fall.

desire and disgust.[46] This conflicted sensation is what Bataille refers to as 'anguish.' Sylvère Lotringer says that, according Bataille, anguish is always on the "threshold to ecstasy" (xi), a threshold, he says, that is crossed in sacrifice. Bataille says that we may find it hard to imagine that we would not withdraw from the things that disgust us, from bloody images of sacrifice. However, he posits that our withdrawal comes about from our desire for the things that disgust us (*Accursed Share Vol. II and III* 95). In a collection of notes that follow his diary-esque 1943 work *Inner Experience*, Bataille cries out to his readers: "SACRIFICE IS THE COMMUNICATION OF ANGUISH" (emphasis in original 194). Desire and horror, ecstasy and anxiety – *anguish* – are, for Bataille, what is communicated in sacrifice.

3.2 Achieving the Dialect: Sacrifice as Communication

It may seem peculiar that Bataille understands sacrifice as enabling, of all things, communication, even if it is the communication of anguish. Yet communication is central to Bataille's theory of sacrifice. Certainly, Bataille was not referring to contemporary semiotic notions of communication, to sign systems or to theories of language that we find in the earlier works of people like Locke or Saussure. Bataille didn't believe that it was possible to 'communicate' in day-to-day life. Because language had already capitulated to utilitarianism (and I will say more about Bataille and utilitarianism shortly), Bataille felt that it was impossible for people to engage with one another within the realm of productivity – a realm that sapped all meaning from communication. Instead, Bataille argued that it was only through undergoing experiences in which individuals were at risk that people were able to communicate with one another (*Unfinished System* 29), where senseless waste and expenditure (the waste and expenditure of a human being sacrificed) were what facilitated communication. Humans can only communicate, Bataille says, when they put themselves at risk, when they render themselves "penetrable to one another . . . thus: all 'communication' partakes of suicide and crime" (*Unfinished System* 30). That is, the community's mixed desire and horror at the violence of a sacrifice allows the community to experience a rift in their day-to-day lives. By putting themselves at

[46] Phaedra is a tragic Ancient Greek figure who appeared in the work of Roman poet Seneca the Younger in 50CE, and before that, in the work of Greek dramatist Euripides in 428 BCE. The tragedy of Phaedra is centred on queen Phaedra's uncontrollable and incestuous passion for her stepson, Hippolytus. What is so compelling about this narrative is that the Ancient Greeks and Romans were no doubt aware of the power of erotic desire – of its potential to excite both extreme joy and horror.

risk/being put at risk, the spectators at a sacrifice communicate with one another through their shared desire and horror, and their shared vulnerability. Sacrifice, Bataille believes, is therefore always a form of self-sacrifice: of putting oneself at risk.

Bataille's notion of sacrifice required a reinterpretation of the crucifixion. Bataille argues that the faithful initially understood Christ's wounding as the bridge that closed the gap in communication between God and humans, and, in the twentieth century (after the death of God), sacrifice, or the *essence* of sacrifice (which for Bataille was not restricted to violence and blood, but could also be transformed into and understood through eroticism, literature (poetry) and laughter) closed the inevitable gap in communication between humans *and* humans. That is, after the death of God, Bataille understood communication as a way of connecting with others and as a way of attempting to escape the isolating prison of the self. It was this centrality of communication both in sacrifice and in religion that was central to Bataille's decision to leave the seminary.

While there are various accounts of Bataille's deconversion, Michael Richardson posits that Bataille's renunciation of faith was not rooted in his belief that Christianity was too oppressive or austere, but rather in his conviction that Christianity was not religious *enough*.[47] Bataille, Richardson says, saw Christianity as denying an element that was essential to all religions: Christianity refused communication, and communication, Bataille believed, was at the heart of 'the sacred,' and therefore of religion (176). While early Christians, Bataille says, understood the crucifixion as a form of communication, he believed that modern Christianity's attempt to remove itself from the 'primitivity' of sacrifice had created a "watered down" version of Christianity that denied communication.[48] It is for this reason, Bataille says in his 1957 work *Erotism*, that of all religions Christianity is "possibly the least religious" (*Erotism* 32). Though Bataille here is talking

[47] Biographer Michel Surya admits that "we do not know why" (23) Bataille left the seminary, but suggests that Bataille's correspondence with one 'Miss C.' may have led to his renunciation of the faith (45-47). While Stuart Kendall says that Bataille abandoned the seminary in favour of a scholarly vocation (Introduction, *Unfinished System* xiii), Jeremy Biles proposes that between Bataille's reading of the ecstasy of the mystics and his reading of Medieval eroticism he made the decision to abandon the church (89). Still others – Michael Richardson for one – say that Bataille "lost his faith and his vocation during a stay at a Benedictine monastery on the Isle of Wight because 'his Catholicism caused a woman he loved to shed tears'" (*Georges Bataille* 20; see also *Inner Experience* 199).

[48] According to Wittman, a lot of Bataille's work has to do with "the subversion of Christianity, or, he would say, in actuality, a more authentic experience of Christ's dereliction that a lot of the history of Christianity has sort of watered down and made us more comfortable with" (Harrison).

specifically of Christianity's rejection of eroticism, his interpretation of eroticism as a modern form of sacrifice necessitates the centrality of communication: that eroticism – which according to Bataille demands, like sacrifice, the loss of individuality – gives way to communication.

Bataille's position on sacrifice, anguish, communication and the crucifixion stands in contrast to the view of French historian and philosopher René Girard, whose ideas and theories of sacrifice are much better known than Bataille's. In a comment that makes Bataille's notion of sacrifice stand brilliantly apart from Girard's, Strenski says that, far from showing sympathy for the suffering victim or disgust at the injustice of victimisation, "Bataille projects what may seem a theatrical perversity in meditating [. . .] on sacrificial (and other) violence and then even celebrating it" (*Theology* 55). Unlike Girard, who bases his understanding of sacrifice on the experience of the hapless victim, Bataille is more interested in the unification of a *community* through sacrifice. What leads this experience away from the individual and into the community is the individual's awareness that the crowd they are immersed in is feeling the same way: both experience horror and desire – *anguish* – at witnessing the sacrificial victim's death. As Goldhammer says: "[s]acrifice cultivates community by fostering a nondiscursive communication between human beings whose sundered individuality permits the formation of an ecstatic bond" (*Headless* 163). It is this shared experience that maintains and strengthens community. And what is being 'sacrificed' at a sacrifice, according to Bataille, is not just the victim, but also individuality and individuation. What is created out of this destruction is communality and community, albeit a community founded not on gain and accumulation, but rather a community that is unified through loss. In *Inner Experience* Bataille says that for a group that is experiencing the motions of anguish at a sacrifice, there is "no longer either isolation or death. Isolation is resolved in the communication of anguish. And death can only strike the isolated individual [the victim], it cannot annihilate the group" (196). Thus isolation and individuation are destroyed; the individual, the victim, dies to facilitate communion within the community. And so, death cannot touch the community because it is unified through its shared anguish.

3.3 Only Lovers Left Alive: Bataillean Sacrifice and Community

It may seem odd that, of all things, Bataille believes that a community is created or maintained through sacrifice. Nevertheless, Jesse Goldhammer argues that other French theorists, like de Maistre and Sorel, believed that community was forged from the fires of sacrifice, and that modern society was void of community. But despite these conservative Christian criticisms of modernity, Bataille largely departed from de Maistre's and Sorel's positions on sacrifice and community. Instead, Bataille believed that the violence of sacrifice led to "unrecoverable loss" rather than, as de Maistre and Sorel believed, to the revival of a persisting social order or the creation of a new order (Goldhammer, *Headless* 162). Laura Wittman says that, when Bataille talks about a community that is founded on the shared experience of sacrifice, it is a very different concept of community than what we understand as community today. Goldhammer agrees, saying that sacrifice cannot form communities that are based on "republicanism, monarchism, or anarcho-syndicalism," because such communities bury their sacrificial origins by attempting to reinstate authority, or a *head,* which Bataille, as we have seen with his creation of *Acéphale*, is so adamant to cut off (*Headless* 163).

The sort of sacrificial community that Bataille envisioned clearly did not exist in modern France.[49] Nevertheless, Niklaus Largier argues that Bataille wasn't a nostalgic or romantic theorist who longed to return to an earlier sacrificial world. Rather, Largier sees Bataille as a theorist who accepted his life in modern France, but who nevertheless critiqued and challenged the modern condition. For Zeynep Direk, Bataille's talk of a 'return' to communality, or what Bataille refers to as a return to 'lost intimacy,' is his desire to acquire "the self-consciousness of what we already are in our historical forgetfulness" (Direk, "Erotic Experience" 100). That is, Bataille does not delude himself into thinking that we can return to a past sense of communality *through* sacrifice as the conservative Catholics believed, or as was believed during World War I (with the drive to reinforce a sense of 'national community'). Instead, Bataille, who positions himself very much outside of these theories, believes that our desire for a state of communality is something that we can never fully return to because such a state may never have existed. As Direk says, Bataille felt that the desire that we feel in sacrifice, as in eroticism, is the desire "to

[49] But of course it is easy to see how Bataille could have *imagined* or even *pined* for a sacrificial society without an authority, without a head, for over a century earlier the people of France had beheaded their monarch, King Louis XVI.

regain an intimacy that was always *strangely lost*, and that intimacy that we have 'the consciousness of having lost' is our own *animality*" (emphasis in original 100).

3.4 Sacrifice as a Return to Intimacy: An Introduction to Bataille's Sacred and Profane

In his posthumously published 1973 work *Theory of Religion*, Bataille attempts to explain his notions of animality, intimacy, communication, and sacrifice through an anthropological rereading of religion, and his theorisation of the history of the origins of society. Bataille begins his investigation by reinterpreting the relationship between humans and matter, that is, by redefining the religious concepts of the sacred and the profane. I have already said that for Durkheim the sacred is that which represents the unity and strength of the community and, likewise for Bataille, the sacred and the communal were interwoven. Bataille believes that the realm of the sacred is the world of intimacy that persisted while primordial humans lived alongside animals and within the world, without the knowledge that they were somehow separate from either the animals or the world around them. Here, Bataille introduces his astonishingly beautiful metaphor of unity, immanence, and intimacy – an intimacy, a community, that persisted when humans, animals and the world, were as indistinguishable from one another like "water in water" (23).

The profane, then, according to Bataille and Durkheim, is that which represents individuality and individuation, as well as the processes, as we shall see, that facilitate individuation. Such processes, as Bataille saw it, were the *everyday* worlds of work and productivity – Bataille's belief is curious when we compare it to the Benedictine rule: *'labore est orare,'* that 'to work is to pray.' In an interview, Stuart Kendall clarifies that Bataille saw the profane as "a world of separation and alienation," but nevertheless it is also the "world that we live in most of the time" (qtd. in Rutledge, "Not Peace But a Sword"). Such a division between sacred and profane, as Durkheim says, might be assigned through 'valuation' or a hierarchy of objects, where one object is considered to be, or considers *itself* to be, superior, or to possess a subject-hood in comparison to another object. Bataille believes that the division between these 'subjects' and 'objects' emerged from the moment that humans first understood themselves as distinct from animals: when humans first understood themselves as subjects and animals as objects that were subordinate to their authority. This new hierarchy of power, Bataille says, generated the profane

world: what Bataille interchangeably calls the world of transcendence and, as I have said, the world of work.

While Bataille agrees with the traditional anthropological (Maussean/Durkheimean) and, up to a certain point, even the Christian notions of the sacred and the profane, he also radically redefines this Christian binary. I have already proposed that, for Bataille, the sacred is the world of intimacy and animality, whereas the realm of the profane is the everyday world of work and productivity. In "The Dualist Materialism of Georges Bataille" Denis Hollier argues that Bataille was fascinated by religious dualisms: the distinctions between good and evil, the transcendent and the immanent (that is, between the divine as outside of the material world (transcendence) and the divine as manifest in the material world (immanence) (as in Spinoza's theory of immanence), and the sacred and the profane. Hollier defines Bataille's theory of the sacred and the profane in these words: "existence is profane when it lives in the face of a transcendence, it is sacred when it lives in immanence" ("Dualist Materialism" 131). But, Hollier goes on to say, for Bataille, the sacred and the profane are at once worlds apart and yet indelibly connected. These two worlds (in one) are characterised by the presence or absence of the *subject*:

> the profane [is the world] in which we live, and the sacred [is the world] in which we die, the world of the presence of I, and the world of the absence of I, of my absence, the world where I am not, where there are no I's. (Hollier 132)

Like the experience of the spectators at a sacrifice, Bataille believed that the destruction of the isolated, individual subject opened into the realm of the sacred. According to Hollier, the world of the sacred is not so much the opposite of the world of the profane but rather is "the alteration of its identity" (132).

It is important to note that Bataille's redefinition and inversion of these dualist notions (good/evil, sacred/profane) become much more apparent in his discussion of sacrifice, specifically in his meditation on the crucifixion. I will explore this inversion later, in my section on Nietzsche, the death of God, and the crucifixion as the greatest evil and the greatest good.

3.5 The World of Work and the Creation of a Profane God

According to Bataille, work is essentially productive, a means to an end. Bataille believes that before this 'fall from grace,' when humans had existed in the world like

'water in water,' they had been no more aware of the finality and limitation of death than other animals. But with the institutionalisation of work, humans realised that, like work projects, they too had 'ends' and limitations, both in the form of death, but also in being eternally separated from one another. Out of this fear of an end, humans developed the concept of an afterlife, something that dissolved the limitations of death and gave human existence a sense of continuity. And yet to maintain morale and productivity societies manipulated their communities into believing that the afterlife was not a right but a privilege; that salvation was something people had to 'work for' in life. Bataille proposes that the ruler and giver of this salvation – God – was created out of the profane world. While the creation of God was supposed to assign a value to things (for example, in Christianity it is believed that God is of the highest 'value'), Bataille argues that what really occurred was an impoverishment because of the inherent paradox in value: if there is a distinction between the value of things, then one thing is necessarily of a higher value than another, thereby forming an inequality or a 'devaluation' of things. Bataille argues that God's higher value is baseless (it is no greater than humans or animals) because God, as Feuerbach theorised, was created *by* humans. Therefore, he suggests that humans, animals, and God are all of equal value. The profane world is an example of the loss of value because it is the loss of the sacred, and the creation of God is thus an aspect of loss (Surya 384).

4. Bataillean Sacrifice and the General Economy

I have proposed that Bataillean sacrifice can only emerge out of a community's lack of unity: out of humanity's no longer being like water in water. I have also proposed, above, that, according to Bataille sacrifice unsettles the profane world – the world of economic stability, of rationality, of utility, of knowledge, and of modernity. To explain this, I would like to draw on Bataille's Marxist proposal that modern, secular, capitalist societies reduce "what is human to the condition of a *thing* (of a commodity)" (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 129). Curiously, Bataille arrives at this point through his belief that religion and economy emerged "in one and the same movement from that which indebted them to one another" (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 129). Yet it is nevertheless important to consider Bataille's reading of religion and the political economy because it allows us to examine his theory of sacrifice through another lens: his interpretation of sacrifice through his notions of the 'general economy' and the 'accursed share.' While Bataille discusses these concepts throughout many of his

works, he explores them in greatest detail in his 1949 three-volume work *La Part Maudite* (*The Accursed Share*). In *The Accursed Share* Bataille explores what may, at first, seem an odd field of scholarship for a theorist who was otherwise preoccupied with eroticism and violence. Bataille puts forward a new economic theory: what he calls the 'general economy.' For Bataille, the general economy overturns the conventions of conservative economic theory or the 'restricted economy.' Unlike a restricted/conservative economy that is run on production, accumulation and gain, Bataille's general economy is based on his Blakean concept of the non-returnable expenditure of excess energy – the 'accursed share.'[50] Bataille believes that if a part of wealth (that is, energy) cannot be used productively it is more logical to squander or consume this 'commodity' without expecting any form of return. In contrast, a restricted economy would not allow anything to 'go to waste' or escape production and productivity or, presumably, efficiency.[51]

Bataille believed that the laws of the general economy extend from the natural world to human society. In the natural world there is an enormous amount of energy available to both individual organisms and to whole communities: specifically, there is a superabundance of biochemical energy that is available to the earth in the form of solar energy. "The origin and essence of our wealth," Bataille says, "are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy (wealth) without any return. The sun gives without ever receiving" (28).[52] Living beings on earth receive this energy and make use of it for growth (both plants and animals alike). However, Bataille says that if an organism has reached maximum growth or is somehow limited in its growth then it must squander any excess energy (32-33). Thus even solar energy cannot be used for entirely productive ends. When limits of accumulation are met, Bataille says that any remaining energy must be spent willingly and gloriously, or else risk erupting into disaster (Noys, *Bataille* 114). Bataille here is attempting to resacralise the world, materiality and our lived experience *in* the world. He celebrates natural surplus and expenditure, rather than a surplus that is tied up with capitalism. What is curious

[50] Bataille's philosophy of the accursed share is based on a Blakean concept of energy. Bataille opens the first volume of his work quoting a passage from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "Exuberance is Beauty" (255).

[51] We must also remember that Bataille's economic philosophy emerged out of the philosophy of the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – a philosophy that was based on efficiency.

[52] It is, however, always important to remember that Bataille is the master of paradox: for, while he proposes that the sun "gives without ever receiving" he nevertheless maintains that the sun 'consumes' (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 34). For more information see Bataille's essay "Rotten Sun."

about Bataille's narrativising of the use and expenditure of natural energy is the way that he creates a *myth* about the origins of energy and life.

For Bataille, this natural/solar cycle of energy is repeated in the human world: "a society always produces on the whole more than is necessary to its subsistence, it disposes of a surplus" (*Accursed Share Vol. II and III* 143). Bataille observes that it is the way this surplus is used that determines the structure and priorities of that society, since it is this very surplus that causes disturbances within society. Like the Marquis de Condorcet, William Godwin and Thomas Robert Malthus, who discuss the origins of agricultural surplus and the 'fall of man,' Bataille too explores the notion that surplus or excess energy is both detrimental to but necessary for an existing economy. That is, the outpouring of excess threatens prevailing systems, but "neither growth nor reproduction would be possible if plants and animals did not normally dispose of excess" (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 27). According to Bataille, the 'accursed share' is thus the necessary, non-returnable part of the economy that must be *consumed*. And, this non-returnable part must be consumed in one of three ways: luxuriously (for example, through eating), erotically (and therefore non-reproductively, for Bataille does not see eroticism as connected to reproduction), or through death.

4.1 Societies of Consumption: The General Economy and Ancient American Sacrifice

In the opening of "General Economics and Postmodern Capitalism," Jean-Joseph Goux makes the observation that it is not the factory, nor the store, the workshop nor bank from which Bataille's principles of the economy emerge. Rather, Goux says:

> in the blood that spurts from the open chests of victims sacrificed to the sun in an Aztec ritual, in the sumptuous and ruinous feasts offered to the courtiers of Versailles by the monarch of divine right, in all these mad dissipations is found a secret that our restricted economics has covered up and caused to be forgotten. (196)

In *The Accursed Share Vol. I* Bataille talks of 'societies of consumption,' specifically Ancient Aztec and Mexican communities and the significance of ritual sacrifice for these communities.[53] Yet Bataille, we must remember, was not an ethnographer. As

[53] I would like to stress that I have only marginal knowledge about Ancient Aztec and Mexican societies and so my exploration of human sacrifice is based purely on Bataille's reading of these

Tiina Arppe says: though Bataille incorporates many historical communities and cultures as examples for his theory of sacrifice, the primordial society that he discusses in his work cannot be fully reduced to any of these historical societies (42). Bataille begins his analysis by clarifying that the Ancient Aztecs and Mexicans were, socially and morally, "poles apart from us" (46). Bataille believed that: "[c]onsumption loomed just as large in their thinking as production does in ours. They were just as concerned about *sacrificing* as we are about *working*" (46). The significance of sacrifice, for the Aztecs and the Mexicans, Bataille believed, was its status as a form of *consumption*. The very nature of sacrifice therefore inverts and overthrows what Bataille in the mid-twentieth century understood as capitalism – a restricted economic system of production *without* consumption.

Bataille offers several lengthy summaries of the particularities of Mexican human sacrifice, but what he is careful to draw his readers' attention to each time is the way that sacrificial victims (who were often either slaves or prisoners of war) were, in the months, weeks or days leading up to their immolation, treated humanely, or often like gods. The sacrifice thus acted as a continuation and release of the energy and tension that has gathered over time; energy and tension which demanded release through death; through the catastrophic and spectacular *consumption* of sacrifice. Bataille's description of the sacrifice is as follows: a Mexican priest would lead their victim to the top of a pyramid where, beneath the sun, the victim was stretched over a stone altar, struck in the chest with a stone knife, and, through the deft actions of the executioner, remained lucid enough to witness their still-beating heart being extracted from their body, being offered to the sun (49). But the apparent barbarism of such sacrificial practices, Bataille says, possesses a deeper social, spiritual and economic foundation; this sort of sacrifice, Bataille argues

> restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation to the intimate participation with the subject. (55)

I have already discussed Bataille's belief that the profane realm emerged out of the human need to distinguish and distance itself from the world, from plants, animals and 'things.' Although this division was initially a means of dividing humans from

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practices. I would also like to make it clear that Bataille's reading of the practices of these ancient societies isn't necessarily accurate or current.

animals, the same division emerged between humans: between subjects (masters) and objects (slaves). Bataille suggests that the sacrificial victim, who over the course of their life has been degraded and rendered profane (that is, they have been reduced to the level of an object or a 'thing' because of their status as a slave or prisoner of war) is, through the rapturous violence of sacrifice, removed from the realm of the profane and returned to the sacred. The subjects of the sacrifice are the spectators, the spectators who desire the sacrifice of the victim, whereas the object of the sacrifice is the sacrificial victim. The subjects therefore witness the sacrifice of the object (the victim, the slave, the prisoner). Of course, as Bataille notes, there is nothing that inherently separates the object from the subject (they are of the same nature (humans)) but over the course of their lives they have assumed different roles. In the sacrifice, the victim is 'repaid' for their role as an object, and this repayment comes both through the shattering (the literal destruction and killing) of their servility, their 'objectness,' and in the form of their admission into the realm of the sacred (their being freed from their role as a slave or prisoner).[54]

Therefore, at the heart of his sociological analysis of sacrifice, Bataille argues that, rather than being given salvation (as in Christianity), the sacrificial victim is saved or 'freed' from utility; they are released from their position as objects, or as slaves in their lifetime *through* their death (*The Accursed Share: Vol. I* 58; *Theory of Religion* 49). For Bataille it is by reaching this limit of death that the sacrificial victim and the spectators are able to experience a moment of freedom – freedom which Bataille understands as "nothing if it is not the freedom of living on the edge of limits where all comprehension breaks down" (*The Impossible* 40). It is therefore a violent freedom that is brought about through the rapturous immediacy of death. The sacrificial victim is restored ('freed') to a world of intimacy, but it is the executioner and spectators who "receive sacred communication from [the sacrifice], which restores [them] in turn to interior freedom" (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 57-58). Thus through the victim's movement from the profane world to the sacred, the spectators are able to experience the victim's death themselves – they are momentarily offered a glimpse of the sacred.

[54] Of course, it is important to note that Bataille did not believe that the Ancient Mexicans understood their actions in this way. Rather, Bataille is interpreting the actions of the Ancient Mexicans *through* his economic theory.

4.2 *Labore est orare*: Productive and Unproductive Expenditure, and the Origins of Religious Taboo

In the shadow of people like Max Weber and R. H. Tawney Bataille believed that there was an undeniable link between religious taboos, the economy, and capitalism. Taking an anthropological approach to his study of pre-capitalist societies, Bataille examined the way that religious notions of good and evil, taboo, transgression and sin were used to direct a society's productivity and therefore its economy. In *The Accursed Share,* Bataille notes the way that attitudes towards wealth have changed in various religions (specifically, in Protestant and Catholic Christianity) and Christianity's preoccupation with accumulation and efficiency through practices of self-denial and labor.[55] Underpinning Bataille's comparative reading of the origins of Christian taboos and the accursed share are his notions of sacrifice and eroticism, and the link he sees between these two excessive practices.

Bataille believed that eroticism, like sacrifice, is excessive and transgressive because it is essentially unproductive, 'perverse' and non-reproductive (Noys, *Bataille* 113). For Jonathan Dollimore, Bataille's notion of erotic transgression is not simply the erotic attraction to the forbidden, but the belief that prohibition, inhibition, horror, and disgust all heighten the intensity of erotic pleasure (252). According to Bataille, human experience is bordered by limits, and these limits are defined by our awareness of the extremes of eroticism and death (*Erotism* 24). Bataille sees erotic transgression as intimately tied up with death, and as especially linked with sacrifice, saying that eroticism is "a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder" (*Erotism* 17). In erotic acts, participants experience the anguish, ecstasy and uninhibited communication associated with the little death of orgasm. The association of eroticism with death is not new; we need only think of the concept of *la petite mort,* which pre-existed Bataille's erotic theory. Like eroticism, Bataille says that the participants and spectators of a sacrifice experience the anguish, ecstasy and uninhibited communication associated with the death of the victim (*Erotism* 170).

Bataille believes that sexual activity can be either productive and procreative, or non-productive and pleasurable, just as death is also either productive (for example through hunting for food) or unproductive (a momentous and bloody sacrifice). In cultures where excess and expenditure were associated with evil or 'primitivity' – and

[55] Consider, for example, the sparseness and simplicity of Protestant churches in comparison to the grand cathedrals of the Catholics.

Bataille felt that Christianity was one religion that associated excess with evil – Bataille says that sacrifice and eroticism were denied on the grounds that they were seen as purposeless and the opposite of work, and therefore as 'sinful.' Such views of eroticism and sacrifice as purposeless and therefore as aligned with sin have clearly shaped modern western attitudes towards these practices. Nevertheless, it is these very forms of non-productive expenditure (sacrifice and eroticism) that, Bataille says, "ultimately connect life with the senseless luxury and excess of death" (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 34-35). Bataille argues that death is an 'excess' because it is the complete negation of productivity and the very essence of 'nothingness.' Bataille also believes that it is the horror of death that promotes productivity and a motivation towards 'purposefulness.' To protect their people from the terrifying awareness of death, Bataille believed that early Christian societies distracted their populations by stressing the importance of the utilitarian notion of 'work,' through which parishioners could avoid temptation, only perform 'good deeds,' and therefore secure a spot in heaven (*Erotism* 44). To protect work from falling into disorder, pressures of guilt and prohibition became modes of regulation. Bataille argues that taboos were introduced to protect society because life is essentially violent disorder and "the main function of all taboos is to combat violence" (*Erotism* 41). And violence, Bataille remarks, "is what the world of work excludes with its taboos" (*Erotism* 42).

Bataille believes that by its very nature, excessive, unproductive outbursts of energy, like sacrifice, must in some way transgress taboos. That is, eroticism and sacrifice can only be transgressive and excessive if they in some way transgress the austerity of everyday life while *reflecting* that austerity, even as they transgress it (*Erotism* 54). Thus in sacrificial societies, sacrifice took an ambivalent position: Bataille says that when a primordial society's economic needs were met, sacrifices, festivals, and luxurious practices were permitted as a means of absorbing excess energy. Yet the aftermath of these sacrifices or festivals gave way to a sense of wrongdoing, thereby reinforcing the taboo that had been transgressed (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 120). Just like the momentary and directed violence that leads a community to sacrifice a virgin on the first day of spring, a community cannot sacrifice a virgin every day of the week in the same way that every day can't be a festival. Bataille believed that sacrifice must be a momentary fracture in a system. Sacrifice, Bataille says, cannot be anything other than momentary, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming mundane, institutionalised, commoditised, and therefore profane.

Bataille believed that, in his day, the institutionalisation and commoditisation of things like religions had led to a weakening and watering-down of religious experience – specifically, to the abolishing of the celebration of ritual sacrifice.

4.3 Sacrificing the Present for the Future: The General Economy and the Modern World

What is striking about Bataille's study of excess, the economy and human society is his frightening, albeit unoriginal, conclusion: that taboos became an internalised part of human psychology and became forms of regulation that were not enforced by outside powers but from within.[56] In a passage that clearly echoes Marx, Bataille says that through work people turn themselves into tools, objects, or slaves: "[t]he world of practice is a world where man is himself a thing" (*Accursed Share Vol. II and III* 213). Bataille believed that people reduced themselves to 'things' through their dedication to the project of work, and that they therefore perpetuated individuation and a lack of meaningful communication. Bataille believes that in work, human desire is misplaced – work does not allow people to experience life in the present, but rather forces people to fixate only on the future and on preparing for the future.[57] It is this inability to be 'present' that disables communication. When people have become 'means' to 'ends,' just as work is a means to an end, Bataille believes that communication is impossible. And it is only through the rapturous forces of sacrifice and eroticism that people can be 'returned' to the present; that through their inherent violence and excessiveness, sacrifice and eroticism immediately arrest individuals, forcibly returning people to the goings on of the present and stopping people from focusing on an abstract future.

For Leslie Anne Boldt, the devotion to the world of production and productivity (the world of work) constitutes a manifestation of the death of God (Kendall, Introduction, *Unfinished System* xii). While I will say more about Bataille's investment in Nietzsche's death of God thesis shortly, it is important to mention Boldt's argument that, for Bataille, the death of God is brought about through the neglect of the sacred. We must, of course, keep in mind that Bataille argued that the sacred *is* communication and communality. Therefore Bataille understands non-

[56] It is important to note Bataille's influence on Foucault, who would go on to explore this form of self-censorship in his panopticon metaphor.

[57] In Christianity, this 'future' is the afterlife, heaven.

productivity and excess expenditure not only as experiential ways of attempting to shatter the isolation that imprisons us, but also as a way of critiquing and rejecting capitalism. In the first volume of *The Accursed Share* Bataille offers an example of this form of consumption without return:

> [t]he man of leisure destroys the products necessary for his subsistence no less fully than does fire [. . .]. We obtain the same result if we ingest a substance, such as alcohol, whose consumption does not enable us to work more – or even deprives us, for a time, of our strength to produce. [Alcohol has] the advantage of consuming without return – without profit – the resources that they use: they simply *satisfy* us; they correspond to the *unnecessary choice* that we make of them. (119)

In the moments we surrender to our desires, Bataille believes that we are briefly removed from our state of worker-servility, and experience what he calls a 'sovereign moment.' According to Habermas and Lawrence, Bataillean sovereignty "means not to let oneself be reduced, as in labor, to the condition of an object, but to free subjectivity from bondage" (90). Borch-Jacobsen says that Bataillean sovereignty "is that which does not serve anything and no purpose other than itself, that which is not a means [. . .] in view of an end" (745). This is perhaps a more accurate interpretation of Bataille's notion of sovereignty, for Bataille also says: "what is sovereign in fact is to enjoy the present time without having anything else in view but the present time" (*Accursed Share Vol. II and III* 199). Sovereignty, like sacrifice, is something that is only experienced momentarily; it is an instant that, Bataille holds, is associated with what he sees as the excesses and 'waste' products of sacrifice, eroticism, poetry, excrement, war and madness, and the refusal to turn this consumption into production or therefore to think of it in terms of the future.[58] In *Literature and Evil* Bataille says that sovereignty is something which escapes all of us, and which "nobody has seized and which nobody can seize for this reason: we cannot possess it, like an object, but we are doomed to seek it [. . .] never can we be sovereign" (193-94). Thus, while it is impossible for humans to 'be' or to 'possess'

[58] Bataille says that 'poetry' is synonymous to 'expenditure' because it is the least intellectualised form of a state of loss (*Visions of Excess* 120). Indeed, one only needs to think of the work of poets like Hans-Georg Gadamer or W. H. Auden. Consider the lines from Auden's poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in which he says: "For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / in the valley of its making where executives / would never want to tamper" (Auden).

sovereignty, Bataille says that we may be able to experience moments of sovereignty through openness and exposure that lead to a radical form of communication.

4.4 *Le grande bataille*: Sovereignty, Sacrifice and the Capitalist War Machine[59]

> *I MYSELF AM WAR.*
>
> Bataille, "The Practice of Joy Before Death," *Visions of Excess*, 239

With all that I have said on Bataillean sovereignty, it may therefore come as a surprise to learn that, for Benjamin Noys, Bataillean sovereignty must be understood as a reflection of Bataille's war experience (*Bataille* 10). According to Noys, war (World Wars I and II, the Spanish Civil War and the Cold War) as well as the very *idea* of war not only demonstrated a dominating and domineering form of violence, but also signaled a destruction of limits (10). Like eroticism and sacrifice, Bataille understood war as an unproductive form of expenditure: as a "catastrophic expenditure of excess energy" (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 23). In *Accursed Share Vol. I* Bataille proposes that human life is nothing other than a "field of multiple destructions," and that our ignorance of the inherent violence of human nature is what causes war to erupt (23). If we do not consciously destroy excess energy, Bataille says, "it is this energy that destroys us; it is we who pay the price of the inevitable explosion" (24). While ancient societies may have averted war and resorted, instead, to sacrifice or festivals, or to building pyramids or other 'purposeless' monuments, in the modern world, "we use the excess to multiply "services" that make life smoother, and we are led to reabsorb part of it by increasing leisure time" (24). However, this reabsorption of energy is, Bataille says, nothing more than a diversion: a diversion through which we do not release any excess and which therefore leads to the war.[60]

According to Michel Surya, war fascinated Bataille. But, Surya is careful to add, war fascinated everyone in modern France (285). For John Hutnyk, we must not confuse Bataille's fascination with war as a desire for war, because Bataille, Hutnyk says, was "clearly militant against the war" (279). More than the ravages of actual war, Surya says that Bataille was intrigued by the *idea* of war, which he believes

[59] Curiously, Bataille's name, in French, means 'battle' or 'war.'
[60] Bataille believes it was an 'industrial plethora' that facilitated both World War I and II (25).

Bataille saw as one of the great truths of the world, as horrific and destructive as it was (283). Surya says that Bataille was skeptical of what he understood as war's 'opposite' – peace. Bataille theorised that peace was a paradoxical, unnatural phenomenon. Because peace cannot tolerate death and destruction and squandering, it therefore cannot tolerate human nature. Peace, Surya observes, "falsely governs the world as if death did not exist" (285). In the past, sacrifice was one means through which a community was reminded of death; through which a community was united by death. In Surya's view, sacrifice, "instead of expelling death's power of dissolution, carried it to the highest point of intensity" (286). However, in the modern world, 'evolved society' seems to have wanted to forget this connection with death and destruction. Therefore in the modern world, "war takes revenge on this forgetting – hateful and ambivalent as the idea may be – [war, for Bataille,] is sacred" (286).

While Surya notes that according to Bataille there exists an "equivalence between *war, sacrifice* and *mystical life*" (emphasis in original. Bataille qtd. in Surya 287), Bataille nevertheless believed that there was a difference between war and sacrifice. The difference being ritual. In sacrifice,

> the ritualization of death links the living, through a sort of pact, to power of individual and social conflagration and of the irruption of death among them . . . War, on the other hand, unleashes outside ritual and pact; it is the free and uncontrolled unleashing of death suddenly and affecting *all* the living . . . (Surya 286)

Thus war, which exists outside of a 'pact,' also exists outside of community; community, being central to Bataillean sacrifice.[61] But while Surya's account concerns the non-ritualised nature of *modern* war, it must be noted that Bataille saw pre-modern war as possessing a religious, perhaps even sacrificial, nature.

In the first volume of *Accursed Share*, Bataille argues that, while Ancient Mexican society was certainly shaped by warfare, "it was not a *military* society.

[61] It is important here to consider whether Bataille understood the army as a 'community.' In "Contact and Communication" Alphonso Lingis suggests that soldiers *do* form a Bataillean, sacrificial community, and that they join the army with the intention of developing comradeship (*The Obsessions of Georges Bataille* 126). However, it is my contention that Bataille would have rejected the idea that the 'military' is a sacrificial community (unless we are talking of a pre-modern military – the military societies of the Ancient Aztecs or Mexicans, for example). Modern militaries/armies rely on a head, an authority – which is exactly what Bataille sought to decapitate. For further reading, see Bataille's essay "The Psychology of Fascism," or consider Surya's thoughts on Bataille and the myth of Fascism (283-299). Consider Denis Hollier's *Absent Without Leave: French Literature Under the Threat of War*.

Religion remained the obvious key to its workings" (54). Although shaped by war, Bataille believes that

> [t]he reasoned organization of war and conquest was unknown to [Ancient Mexican and Aztec societies]. A truly *military* society is a venture society, for which war means a development of power, an orderly progression of empire. It is a relatively mild society; it makes a custom of the rational principles of enterprise, whose purpose is given in the future, and it excludes the madness of sacrifice. There is nothing more contrary to military organization than the squanderings of wealth represented by hecatombs of slaves. (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 54-55)

Although Bataille does not explicitly propose that these military/venture societies were either precursors to, or *are* modern societies, it is curious that he sees military and modern societies as possessing similar characteristics – of being governed by reason and organisation, of their quest for power, of their relative mildness and their exclusion of the squandering of excess through sacrifice, and of their continuous focus on production, productivity and the future. According to Benjamin Noys, it was the very obsession with progress and production in the modern west that led to such destructive twentieth-century warfare. Noys says that for Bataille, "[t]hese global conflicts [were] symptoms of the failure of capitalist economies to deal with the excess of the accursed share, except catastrophically" (*Bataille* 119). According to Bataille, it was this 'industrial plethora' that sparked the genesis of the two wars – particularly World War I (*Accursed Share Vol. I* 25).

5. God and Country: World War I, Nietzsche, Bataille

28 July 2014 marked one hundred years since the beginning of World War I. The centenary of this momentous occasion has once again reawakened debate surrounding the links between the war, religion and sacrifice – specifically, whether the deaths of the soldiers in the Great War can be interpreted as sacrificial, and whether their deaths were understood as a sacrifice at the time. In his 2014 work *The Great and Holy War* Philip Jenkins argues that the First World War was undoubtedly viewed as a religious war: a war that was not only fought by the world's leading Christian nations, but also a war that borrowed religious rhetoric and imagery (particularly through descriptions of the war as a crusade, as apocalyptic, or as bringing about Armageddon). However,

Joseph Loconte (in his upcoming publication, *God and the Great War*) argues that World War I was not so much a religious war as it was a political war in which nations vied for power, domination, geography, and resources (Rutledge). Whether the Great War can be considered a religious war or not, it is certainly true that religious and sacrificial rhetoric was employed in war propaganda, was used to invoke a sense of nationhood, and was used post-war when memorialising the dead.[62]

It is also worth noting that World War I was the context in which the work of Friedrich Nietzsche was gaining a wider readership. During the war, the text given as a gift to German soldiers alongside the *New Testament* and Goethe's *Faust*, was Nietzsche's 1883 *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). It may even have been through this dissemination of Nietzsche's work that so many then-fledgling philosophers and thinkers were introduced to his theory: we know, for instance, that Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Ernst Jünger read Nietzsche during the war (possibly while serving in the war), although all three philosophers came to give very different accounts of the war, and developed very different war philosophies, they all connected war with religion and mysticism. With the widespread reading of Nietzsche's work, it is unsurprising that Bataille was introduced to Nietzsche's theory during his time at the seminary, which was not long after he served his conscription notice in World War I. Although he never fought in the war, confined, as he was, to his hospital bed, stricken with tuberculosis, Bataille was adamant that if he had been well, and if he had been called, he would have fought, not because he had a taste for the barbarities of war, but to responded to the call "as one responds to anguish when it becomes excessive" (Surya 24). It was in the wake of the destruction of the First World War and in the wake of the loss of his faith, that Bataille discovered the work of Nietzsche. According to Sylvère Lotringer, Nietzsche was perhaps the most important figure in the development of Bataille's thought. It was Nietzsche who rescued Bataille, at age 23, from the crisis of Christianity, and who drove him to question his faith (Lotringer, Introduction vii). Although Bataille began reading Nietzsche while he was in the seminary, it was not until 1922, when he became friends with Ukrainian/Russian philosopher Léon Chestov (also known as Lev Shestov), that he became more thoroughly acquainted with Nietzsche's work. Such

[62] See Jay Winter's 1995 *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning*; see the cruciform soldier centrepiece sculpture – curiously entitled "Sacrifice" – at the ANZAC Memorial in Sydney's Hyde Park. It is also worth noting that even contemporary commemorations of World War I continue to use religious and sacrificial imagery: consider the crucifixion imagery employed in Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli*.

was his dedication to the German philosopher that, during World War II, Bataille was among the few who tried to clear Nietzsche's name from the taint of Nazism.[63]

5.1 God, Disemboweling Himself: Nietzsche and his Sovereign Madmen

Of all Nietzsche's concepts, it was his death of God thesis that most informed Bataille's thought and work. Nietzsche's declaration of the death of God at the hands of humanity appears in several of the German philosopher's parodic and parabolic works including his "Parable of the Madman" (*"Der tolle Mensch"*) from his 1882 book *The Gay Science*, and in his quasi-religious 1885 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.[64]

What is fascinating about Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God is that, in both *Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, it is not Nietzsche who pronounces the death, but his protagonists. The preeminent passage in *Zarathustra* concerns the work's central character, the sage Zarathustra: "But when Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: 'Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead*!'" (41). Like Zarathustra, the madman in Nietzsche's "Parable of the Madman" is another biblical figure – the madman who speaks the truth.[65] "The Parable of the Madman" tells the story of a man running through a marketplace mid-morning, carrying a glowing lantern.[66] The madman tells the people at the market that he is looking for God, uttering the famous lines: *"Gott ist todt! Gott bleibt todt! Und wir haben ihn getödtet!"* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*).[67] Yet the people at the market are, Nietzsche says, atheists, who only laugh at the madman. The market goers are already on a path to a future where God is absent, and yet the madman sees that they are not aware of God's death, of God's murder, or of the fact that *they* have murdered God. The parable has been variously interpreted as an attack on Christianity and, in

[63] This may also have been Bataille's way of validating his fascination with excess, violence and fanaticism that he claimed the fascists had misappropriated. It is also important to note that the second issue of *Acéphale* was dedicated to Nietzsche and included Bataille's lengthy article "Nietzsche and the Fascists," in which Bataille attacks Nietzsche's sister and her role in aligning Nietzsche's thought with Nazi thought.

[64] By 'parodic,' I am referring to Nietzsche's parodying of the Bible in *Thus Spoke*, which contains the "sermon on the mount" – a sermon that is given to cows, and which is clearly a parody of the "sermon on the mount" from Matthew 5 in the Bible, in which Jesus utters the famous lines: "blessed are the poor," and "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (5:3-5:5).

[65] Consider the madman among the tombs, Mark 5:2-20.

[66] The madman in Nietzsche's story is reminiscent of the Ancient Greek cynic philosopher Diogenes, who was famous for, among other stunts, carrying a lantern during the daytime, claiming that he was looking for an honest man.

[67] "God is dead! God remains Dead! And we have killed him!" (*The Gay Science* 120).

contrast, as a reflection on humanity's lost connection with God, and the madness that has set in because of this loss.

For Paul Hegarty, Nietzsche's announcement of the loss of God – the intensity of the idea of the god who remains dead – led Bataille to see Nietzsche as both a writer and a *figure* of sovereignty (72). Bataillean sovereignty, which Hegarty says "represents the status of the subject when caught up in general economy" (71), is the moment where the subject individual of the restricted economy is put at stake: where, like Nietzsche's God, it loses itself through death. Invoking Bataille, Hegarty says that, when Zarathustra announces the death of God,

> man is left to his own devices, and becomes capable of genuine subjectivity. However, at exactly the same moment, subjectivity becomes impossible, because the guarantor of truth (and thus of identity) is gone. (73)

The death of this guarantor of truth and identity – God – is of significance to Bataille who, Hegarty says, unlike Heidegger, is not interested in the 'truth of the subject' but, rather, is interested in the point at which the "subject loses its truth" (73). Bataille believed that God's death enabled (or, Hegarty says, 'requires') humans to live sovereignly. However, only those who are *aware* of God's death, only those who are aware of their role as a murderer of God can experience sovereignty. That is, if we are to experience a sovereign moment, we must plead guilty to the murder of God. For those who are not aware of God's death, or for those who do not plead guilty to murder (consider the atheists that Nietzsche refers to in "Parable of the Madman"), life remains servile. But this servile existence in the wake of the death of God is even worse than before because people can no longer live to serve God (because God is dead), but instead "serve for serving's sake" (Hegarty 74). Servile human life is a life governed by a restricted economy, where humans become means to ends, rather than sovereign beings that are ends in themselves, as ends without means.

The death of God was therefore a moment to be both celebrated and mourned; celebrated because it allowed the possibility of human sovereignty, and yet mourned because it signaled the secularisation of the modern world, and therefore the loss of the sacred. Nietzsche too wrote of the loss and return of the sacred: through his death of God thesis, Nietzsche imagines not only society's return to a hierarchical structure that resembled the Medieval Church, sans the Christian religion, but he also imagines the West's return to a polytheistic Graeco-Roman world of ritual and

worship (Young 99-100).[68] Of course Nietzsche (like Bataille) did not believe that it was truly possible to *return* to the past – to an Ancient Greek or Roman world or community. Furthermore, the polytheism that Nietzsche spoke of was only a form of theism insofar as *we* become these gods. As Nietzsche's madman asks: "must we ourselves not become gods?" (*The Gay Science* 181). For Nietzsche, the death of God demanded a change in humanity – it instituted a new, *sovereign*, 'super-humanity': a humanity that could not retain the Dionysianism of the past, one that rejected Christianity, and that therefore had to create or become something new (Fornari xiii). Nietzsche imagined two types of people emerging out of the death of God: the first, a group of 'nauseated nihilists' and atheists, the second, a group of super-humans, or 'new philosophers'. The nihilists and atheists – those whom Bataille would see as living lives of servility – either mourn a world that is empty of God, or "live as if God never existed" (Fritzsche 9). On the other hand, the super-humans, or 'new philosophers' (those sovereign individuals) recognise themselves as murderers and are liberated through the death of God; they are freed from any form of dogma, be it religious or scientific. Thus Nietzsche's notion of the super-humans who emerge out of the death of God, and his madman's question: "must we ourselves not become gods?" all clearly coalesce in Kendall's proposal that Bataille's fascination with sacrifice is a fascination with sovereignty, with "experiencing the world not in relation to God, but from the position of God" (Introduction, *Unfinished System* xxx).

5.2 The Assumption of Body and Soul: Nietzsche, Bataille and the Death of God

> *I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar*.
>
> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 16

In order to explore Bataille's reading of Nietzsche, and his interpretation of the Death of God, it is necessary to first say something about Bataille's 1944 lecture on the German philosopher – what Bataille called his "Discussion on Sin." In early 1944, Bataille's book *Le Coupable* (*Guilty*) had gone to press, and the French cognoscenti

[68] Before he began working as a philosopher, Nietzsche was a classical philologist (that is, he was a scholar of Ancient Greek and Roman textual criticism).

eagerly awaited the publication of his new work *Sur Nietzsche* (*On Nietzsche*). Bataille's lecture, which preceded the discussion, was later to be entitled "Summit and Decline," and appeared in *Sur Nietzsche*.

Attending the discussion was the *crème de la crème* of the French intelligentsia: those who were associated with Bataille, including Blanchot and Klossowski, as well as Bataille's close friend Leiris. There were the existentialists: Sartre, Hyppolite, de Beauvoir, Camus, and the discussion leader that day was the existentialist Maurice de Gandillac. Phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty also attended the lecture and discussion. Finally, there was a religious panel, which consisted of the Jesuit and future cardinal Father Daniélou, and the Catholic thinkers Gabriel Marcel and Marcel Moré, among others. The post-lecture discussion was divided into two competing panels: the Catholics and the existentialists. At Moré's house, just after lunch, Bataille began his keynote lecture.

In his lecture, Bataille discusses the nature of good and evil and thereby comes to the key theme of the discussion: sin. At the heart of Bataille's lecture is the proposition that "the most equivocal expression of evil at the summit is Christ on the cross" (*Unfinished System* 28).[69] It is worth noting that, while Bataille doesn't mention Nietzsche in his lecture, he is clearly basing his work on Nietzsche's death of God thesis, and also makes clear references to other passages from *Zarathustra*, and Nietzsche's later works *Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*. Bataille raises several key points in his lecture: he speaks of his concepts of summit and decline, where, according to Benjamin Noys, Bataille understands the summit as "a place 'beyond good and evil'" or even, "*beyond sense*" (*Bataille* emphasis in original 67). Thus it is possible to reread Bataille's thesis as "the most equivocal expression of evil at the [place beyond good and evil, beyond sense] is Christ on the cross." But in doing so we come across another problematic term in Bataille's lecture – the definition of evil.

It is important to note that, despite his dedication to Nietzsche, Bataille both extrapolated and diverged from Nietzsche's philosophy in several significant ways. We know that when he speaks of the death of God, Nietzsche is not referring to the death of Christ and therefore is not speaking of the crucifixion. Bataille, however,

[69] We might even consider the links between Bataille's proposition and Fornari's clarification of Nietzsche's stance on Christianity in *The Antichrist*: "Nietzsche nurtured hatred not only against Christianity but specifically against Christ himself, defined as 'the idiot Christ on the cross'" (Fornari xii-xiii).

uses Nietzsche's notion of the death of God, Nietzsche's 'transvaluation of all values,' and his concept of 'beyond good and evil' to redefine Christian moral terminology (words like 'good,' 'evil,' and 'sin') through which Bataille rereads the sacrifice of the crucifixion. The transvaluation of all values is a concept that appears in Nietzsche's 1895 book *Der Antichrist* (*The Antichrist*), in which Nietzsche argues that Christianity, not merely as a religion, but as a moral system, inverts nature. In Christianity, Nietzsche says, the weak are elevated and the strong are rejected.[70] Nietzsche unpacks his thesis – that Christianity acts in opposition to nature – when he pinpoints what is determined as sinful in Christianity: desire. In his lecture, Bataille addresses the transvaluation of all values when he talks of the crisis of God's being in sacrifice (at the crucifixion), and the way that Christians desire God's death: "A Christian mystic crucifies Jesus. His love even requires God to be at risk [. . .]. The saint's crime par excellence is erotic" (*Unfinished System* 31). While Nietzsche didn't write, at any great length, about eroticism, Bataille extrapolates from Nietzsche's philosophy to propose that it is the erotic nature of mysticism and Christian worship that entices the faithful to desire Christ's crucifixion.

For Christian mystics, Bataille says, sexual desire awakens ecstatic moments (much the same as in erotic love), and the object of their love – Christ crucified – becomes synonymous with the mystic's self-annihilation. That is, the mystic's meditation on the crucifixion leads to the shattering of their sense of self. Bataille believed that the ecstasy of saints and mystics bordered on sovereignty; it was the ecstasy of stepping outside of the 'self,' of the loss of the subject.[71] However, in his 1943 work *Inner Experience* Bataille proposes that saints' and mystics' experiences could not have been ecstatic in the etymological sense (of standing outside of their 'self') because the experience would have been tainted by the presence of God. Bataille argues that to propose a quest for God, or to describe an experience as being brought about by God, is to limit that experience. The very presence of the concept of God, he says, only serves to place boundaries around a mystical, indescribable, impossible experience:

[70] Nietzsche rejects the decree in Matthew 5:5, that: "the meek shall inherit the earth".

[71] Curiously, 'ecstasy,' the word that mystics and saints used to describe their experience of communicating and unifying with God, comes from the Greek word *exstasis* which means to 'displace,' or to 'put out of place,' or, 'to drive out of one's mind,' and is derived from *ek-* 'out' and *-histanai* 'to place,' 'to stand' ("Ecstasy").

> If I said decisively: "I have seen God", that which I see would change. Instead of the inconceivable unknown – wildly free before me, leaving me wild and free before it – there would be a dead object and the thing of the theologian – to which the unknown would be subjugated, for, in the form of God, the obscure unknown which ecstasy reveals *is obliged to subjugate me*. (*Inner Experience* 4)

What Bataille sought through his 'use' of Nietzsche's transvaluation of all values (and, again, I must stress that Bataille's motivations departed from Nietzsche's) was the inversion of the Christian moral system and the development of an order in which eroticism and violence transcended moral condemnation and thereby existed beyond the Christian notions of 'good' and 'evil.' And it is here that Bataille discusses the connection between evil and sacrifice. Bataille believed that sacrifice was inherently connected with communication, and communication (and the desire to communicate) is, by definition, the desire to commit evil (*Unfinished System* 30). Bataille believes that communication is a source of life, and that therefore *evil* is also a source of life. And for Bataille being at 'the summit' involves not simply submitting one's self to evil, but rather of *wanting* evil – of *wanting* sacrifice and therefore of *wanting* to communicate. Thus we may reread Bataille's lecture proposition as: "the most equivocal expression of [communication] at the [place beyond good and evil, beyond sense] is Christ on the cross."

There were predictable criticisms of the lecture that day: from the Christian panel that, while Bataille invoked Christian terminology, his views were not Christian, and from the existentialists that, because God had never existed, there was little point holding a discussion on the topic of sin. Sartre also made the judgement that Bataille was using the word 'sin' as a cover for his own idiosynchratic reading of the word. Indeed, Sartre's assessment is, in part, correct. Bataille, however, didn't want to blasphemously redefine the word 'sin,' but rather wanted to employ and redefine a whole theological lexicon. While calling the lecture a "Discussion on Sin" may well have led some to expect a discussion on orthodoxy, Bataille mediated his use of the term 'sin' through Nietzsche's concept of the transvaluation of all values. During the post-lecture discussion he remarked:

> Sin is defined, on the one hand, by God's commandments. It's obvious that, from God's commandments, I've only retained a part;

> I have, on the other hand, elided the fact that I referred to a universal experience of the separation of acts into good and evil. (*Unfinished System* 57)

Sartre wasted no time in responding: "That changes everything. There's a good for you" (57). Of course Bataille believed in a good and an evil; this was, after all, a discussion on sin. But this good and evil was a reinterpretation of good and evil as inspired by Nietzsche – a good and evil that existed beyond these orthodox Christian terms, while nevertheless invoking these orthodox Christian terms. This was an evil that, for Bataille, was connected to the desire to communicate, and an ambivalent form of sin that positioned the crucifixion as the moment at which both the greatest good and the greatest evil were enacted.

What may have perplexed Bataille's audience at the lecture was the concessionary structure of his argument on sin. Bataille began his lecture by acknowledging the Christian reading of sin and then went on to reread the crucifixion through his own Nietzschean definition of sin. Bataille says that for Christians the murder of a man, let alone a god, is repugnant – is sinful – in the traditional orthodox sense.[72] However, the crucifixion is not simply a murder, it is also a ritual sacrifice: it is a necessary killing of a God whose death, in the orthodox tradition, allowed the gates of heaven to open, allowed humanity to have their sins washed away (or paid for) and bridged the gap between humans and God – the crucifixion acted as a way for humans and God to communicate. According to Bataille, the inherent paradox in orthodox theology is that Christians must not only suffer the knowledge that they have killed their god, but they must also suffer their *desire* for his death, because without God's death, the gates of heaven will not open, human sin will not be purged, and no one will be granted eternal life.

Bataille believes that the crucifixion can be called a 'sin' because it was the moment that humanity attained the 'summit of evil' (*Unfinished System* 28) – the death (murder) of God – in which moral Christian norms (utility, servility) were overturned. Thus the crucifixion was a sin because it was a murder:

> The killing of Jesus Christ is held by Christians as a group to be evil. It is the greatest sin ever committed. It even possesses an unlimited nature. Criminals are not the only actors in the drama,

[72] Indeed, the sixth commandment is: "thou shalt not kill."

> since the fault devolves on all humans. Insofar as someone does evil (every one of us being *required* to do evil), that person puts Christ on the cross. Pilate's executioners crucified Jesus but the God they nailed to the cross was put to death as a sacrifice: crime is the agent of this sacrifice. (*On Nietzsche* 17-18)

That is, the crime of a sacrifice precedes its sacrificial nature: the crucifixion was both the execution of a criminal and the crime of murder. It must also be noted that the sacrificial narrative of the crucifixion is retrospective, it wasn't until later that the violence of the murder/execution gave way to a story of sacrifice and resurrection.

In Bataille's view, the criminal and sacrificial nature of the crucifixion still persists through the penitent's observation of the crucifixion. Bataille proposes that, by identifying with Christ's suffering, the spectators come to understand the sinfulness of the murder as ecstasy, as sacrifice. Bataille says that the crucifixion also opened up communication between God and humans because communication requires wounding, extreme openness and vulnerability. Here, again, Bataille diverges from Nietzsche's disdain for things like vulnerability and openness, while nevertheless invoking Nietzsche's interest in wounding and violation. The highest form of evil, which is the upturning and violation of moral norms (sin), becomes linked with the greatest good (communication). Sin, Bataille argues, is inherently linked to communication or the desire to communicate because of the relationship between the sinfulness of sacrifice and the necessary wounding that must be inflicted on beings to allow communication to take place: "communication happens only between two beings at risk" (*Unfinished System* 30). The good of the sacrifice is the communication that comes about *through* the evil that is committed; the sin of mutual wounding that occurs between God and humans as the worshippers suffer the death of their god, but rejoice through communication. Therefore, goodness and sin are intertwined: the good of communication cannot come about without the sin of murder.

Such a rereading of the paradox of Christian desire and the crucifixion clearly stems from Nietzsche's death of God thesis, but whereas Nietzsche's market-goers see themselves as innocent atheists (innocent, insofar as they believe that they could not kill God because they do not believe in God) Bataille's Christians are perennially struck with guilt: they are forever agonised not only by the fact that their god is dead, that their god remains dead, and that they have killed him, but also that they have desired this death. Bataille explains the crucifixion as both the moment in

which humans committed the greatest sin, the ultimate taboo and transgression – deicide – and, thus attained the summit of evil, and, paradoxically, as the greatest good because it is an act of communication and the creation of new values that overturn Christian values (it is, according to Bataille, both community building and a resacralisation of communication).

5.3 Death of Myth, Myths of Death: The Construction of Sacrificial Myths after the Death of God

The difference between Nietzsche's death of God thesis and the crucifixion of Christ is that, in the crucifixion narrative, the god is resurrected, whereas Nietzsche's dead god *remains* dead. The concept of the unresurrecting God, the inversion of Frazer's 'king of the wood' myth, fascinated Bataille, and it is this very fascination that makes his reading of the death of God unique. Bataille interprets Nietzsche's death of God thesis alongside the story of the crucifixion. Such a reading may not seem distinctive because contemporary theologians, such as radical evangelists Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, have performed similar (although highly idiosyncratic) interpretations. Bataille, however, employs a 'both/and' tactic when reading Nietzsche: like Nietzsche, Bataille understands the death of God metaphorically, as a reference to the decentring of God and Christianity in modern Europe, yet he also repurposes Nietzsche's thesis to form a new reading of Christ's death at the crucifixion. Bataille attempts not only to write about a world that has been abandoned by god, but also writes about the continued significance of religion, religious practice and sacrifice after the death of God. Such a rereading of Nietzsche's philosophy can be seen through Bataille's creation of a godless religion and religious practice – the secret society *Acéphale*, in which a beheaded (sacrificed) human would never resurrect. According to Allan Stoekl, what Bataille attempted to do was create a Nietzschean religion; to form a religion through the death of god, in the absence of god ("A Commentary on the Texts" 263).

The purpose of the secret society *Acéphale* (if we may say that it had a purpose without proposing that it was in any way a 'project,' since Bataille's understanding of sacrifice was the negation of all forms of productivity) was to revive mythic forms of ritual and to perform a ritual sacrifice (Stoekl, Introduction, *Visions* xix). In attempting to revive mythic rituals, the secret society became something of a myth in its own right. As Wittman says, very little is known about what went on at

these meetings under the struck-down tree (Harrison), but *knowing* that there were secret meetings at a felled tree creates a myth in itself. The icon of this mythic society was, Stoekl says, the headless *acéphalic*-man – part dismembered Dionysus, part crucified Christ, and, curiously, part Nietzsche (Introduction, *Visions* xx). This final component of the *acéphalic*-trinity – Nietzsche – is no doubt a reflection of just how central Nietzsche was to Bataille's philosophy. The 'religion' was only short-lived, but from its demise came both the journal and secret society. The first two issues of the journal featured articles on the German philosopher, the second issue being entirely dedicated to protecting Nietzsche's name and ideas from fascism. Members of the secret society were said to have meditated on Nietzsche's work and, according to Jeremy Biles, Bataille believed that sacrifice (and thus the sacrifice he hoped to hold in the secret society) would "activate a Nietzschean myth and concomitant experience of the sacred predicated not on the presence of the divine, but paradoxically on the death of God" (128). For Stoekl, the *acéphalic*-man not only illustrated Nietzsche's death of God thesis, but also the death of the classical conception of man (as I have said, the *acéphalic*-man parodies da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, an image that embodied classical human reason) (Introduction, *Visions* xx), and also personified what Bataille understood as the death and absence of myth in modernity. The seeming paradox here is that, while Bataille celebrated the death of God, he lamented the death of myth. This lamentation for the death of myth was synonymous with a form of lost communality in modernity, because myth is at the heart of religion and sacrifice, and is therefore bound up with the formation of community.

5.4 After the End: The Significance of Sacrifice in the Absence of God

Bataille's theory of religion is written from the perspective of a world where God is absent: "If, in the night, the sidewalk vanishes beneath my feet, for a brief instant, my heart sinks: I have the weak idea of the absence of God" (*Inner Experience* 103).[73] In the absence of God (where humans can no longer commune with god, but instead commune with one another) Bataille believes that, for communication to exist

[73] In her chapter aptly titled "Does God have a future?" Karen Armstrong argues that twentieth century French atheism took a varied approach to a world absent of God – reactions ranged from apathy to utter relief. Sartre's position on a world absent of God expressed a sense of necessary desolation: there was now a God-shaped hole in the human consciousness where, previously, God had always been (Armstrong, *A History of God* 378).

between humans, communication must be crucifixion-like: both parties must be willing to be made vulnerable and penetrated by the other, and to be wounded, cut, and traumatised, like Christ.[74] It was Bataille's contention that: "[w]e can't rely on anything. Except ourselves [. . .]. In every regard, right up to the present, people have always relied on each other – or God" (*On Nietzsche* 4). For too long, Bataille believed, humans had been left, stranded, unable to communicate with one another: not only had Christianity overlooked the significance of the crucifixion as a form of communication between God and humans, but in mordernity, in the wake of the death of God, it was necessary for humans to rely on one another if there was to be any attempt to resacralise communication. Bataille observes that communication is something that all humans strive for and that the sinfulness of communication comes out of the desire to communicate: because we want to communicate (and communication is only possible through desecration and wounding – the crucifixion) we must want evil.

Bataille believes that it is only through a metaphorical participation in suicide and crime – through an acknowledgement of our own suffering, of our limits, our refusal to hide away from our anguish and anxiety, and of our realisation of our own impending death – that we can engage in sacrifice, both of ourselves and of God; God, whom we must kill in order to summon (Boldt, Translator's Introduction, *Inner Experience* xii).[75] Foucault unpacks Bataille's seemingly paradoxical interpretation of the death of God when he asks:

> what does it mean to kill God if he does not exist [. . .]? Perhaps it means to kill God both because he does not exist and to guarantee that he does not exist [. . .] to kill God to liberate life from his existence that limits it, but also to bring it back to those limits that are annulled by this limitless existence – as a sacrifice. ("A Preface to Transgression" 32)[76]

Bataille believed that, because religion was a human construction, so too was God. Thus Bataille, even as an atheist, felt that it was necessary to explore what the death

[74] Interestingly, Žižek, who called Christianity the 'religion of the cut,' associated Christianity with trauma (Žižek qtd. in Pound 38).

[75] While the death of God is often attributed to the work of Nietzsche, it entered theological and philosophical consciousness through the works of Saint John of the Cross, William Blake, and Hegel.

[76] There is a curious parallel here, with Beckett's play *Endgame*, where Hamm cries out: "The Bastard!! He doesn't exist!" (*The Complete Dramatic Works* 119).

of God meant in a world where God was absent, where God, according to twentieth-century philosophy, was in full retreat from the world.[77]

5.5 "The science of the Death of God": Bataille's A/Theological Agenda

The structure that results from Bataille's interpretation of Nietzsche's death of God thesis is consistent with the philosophy of atheology, or what Bataille defines as "the science of the death of God" (Kendall, Introduction, *Unfinished System* xxxviii). According to Kendall, atheology is a 'means to the impossible'; it is a philosophy that is *against* knowledge. Atheology, Kendall says, seeks the "*place of God*" (my emphasis xxxviii).

While I disagree with Roland Champagne's calling atheology a form of negative theology, I agree with his statement that atheology is a "theory of respect for the sacred that excludes God" (1). It is interesting to note that Bataille's works *Inner Experience, Guilty,* and *On Nietzsche* all collected under the title *La Somme Athéologique,* which no doubt plays on and inverts St Thomas Aquinas's magnum opus *Summa Theologica* (1265-1274). As Benjamin Noys suggests, the 'a' prefix in 'atheology' is Bataille's attempt at depriving theology of its 'head,' depriving it of God (*Bataille* 65).

While atheology can be used as an umbrella term for Bataille's thoughts on religion, its goal (if we may say that atheology has a goal) is sovereignty and inner experience. I have clarified that the 'goal' of the sovereign moment is the shattering of the isolation that deprives us of communication. This is also the goal of inner experience – the shattering of subjectivity in order to communicate. Of inner experience, Bataille says:

> the subject in experience loses its way, it loses itself in the object which itself is dissolved [. . .] it loses itself in human communication; as subject it is thrown outside of itself, beyond itself; it ruins itself in an undefined throng of possible existences. (*Inner Experience* 61)

Therefore, inner experience is not, as it sounds, a turning inward to one's self but is rather an experience of the *outside,* of a community. Noys observes that inner

[77] For philosophers like the late Leszek Kołakowski, it was God's silence and inaction that had become unbearable. In his 2006 essay, "Is God Happy?" Kołakowski poses this very question 'is God happy?' in an attempt to understand God's silence in the face of human suffering.

experience consists of three major elements: first, it is a momentary experience that does not offer the hope of salvation or anything outside of the itself: this is what Bataille means by the word 'inner.' Second, the experience has its own authority. Third, the experience explores and then contests its own limits – be they the limits of language or subjectivity (*Inner Experience* 50).

5.6 Is God Grumpy? Nietzsche, Bataille and the Laughter of an Absent God

Two years before his 1944 "Discussion on Sin," Bataille published the essay "Nietzsche's Laughter" in the Belgian journal *Exercice de silence*. Kendall believes that "Nietzsche's Laughter" is a preliminary work on which Bataille later based his books *Inner Experience* (1943), *Guilty* (1944), and *On Nietzsche* (1945). In "Nietzsche's Laughter" Bataille outlines his notions of meditation and the annihilation of the self, where he describes a form of suffering that doesn't fulfill any Christian project – no path to purity or salvation – and he proposes that this suffering leads to a form of communion with what he calls, 'the impossible.'

Bataille opens "Nietzsche's Laughter" with an explanation of two concepts – the possible and the impossible. He writes that 'the possible' and 'the impossible' are two 'states' that persist *in* the world. The 'possible' is the sphere of organisms, the material world, the 'real' world, whereas the 'impossible' is the realm of destruction and death. Bataille believes that we, as living beings, situate ourselves within the realm of the possible. We imagine our lives in the possible world as being directed by a certain narrative of events or continuity. It is a world in which we imagine that we can 'know' things; it is a world in which we are given a sense of purpose and meaning because of belief in God and belief in salvation. The impossible is the very antithesis of this certainty, stability and knowledge.[78] "Man's [sic] limit," Bataille says, "isn't God, isn't the possible, it is the impossible, the absence of God" (*Unfinished System* 23).[79] Nietzsche, Bataille believed, also wrestled with the possible and the impossible. And it is in Nietzsche's statement on laughter that Bataille sees Nietzsche grappling with the possible and the impossible most clearly: "To see tragic characters founder and to be able to laugh, despite the profound understanding, emotion, and sympathy

[78] To speak of a 'knowable' world inevitably connotes empiricism and scientific positivism. Bataille, curiously, does not position science and religion in opposition to each other but understands them both as ways of knowing and forestalling the instability of reality.

[79] Bataille notes something very similar in his 1944 work *Guilty* in which he says that "God is not the limit of man, but the limit of man is divine. Put differently, man is divine in the experience of his limits" (93).

that we feel: this is divine" (Nietzsche qtd. in Bataille, *Unfinished System* 22). Bataille sees this sort of laughter as a reaction to the 'impossible.' That is, we laugh when the sense of the impossible overcomes both indifference *and* sympathy, because, in order to laugh we cannot remain indifferent to or overly sympathetic with the thing that evokes laughter (23). Bataille, then, draws a beautiful and devastating comparison with Nietzsche's death of God thesis: he describes a god that is slowly sinking – *foundering?* – to its death and all the while mocking the possible, laughing at the impossible (23). Simon Critchley calls Bataille's interpretation of Nietzschean laughter the laughter of the 'eternal return': "there is the laughter of what Nietzsche calls 'eternal return,' the golden laughter of tragic affirmation" (*Humor* 105). This sort of laughter, Critchley says, is a 'heroic' form of laughter, the sort of laughter that comes in peals from mountaintops, manic and solitary, and as though the person laughing is on the brink of sobbing (Critchley 105). Critchley's analysis of Nietzschean laughter is in accordance with Kendall's reading of Bataille: the Nietzschean laughter that Bataille writes of is laughter that is "occasioned by the going under, the foundering that is death" (Introduction, *Unfinished System* xxiii). This is both laughter *at* the death of God, and the laughter *of* the dying god. As Bataille asks: "what does the divine attained by laughter mean if not the absence of God?" (*Unfinished System* 23).

6. The Sacrifice of Laughter, The Sacrifice of Literature

6.1 Bataille's Sacrificial Laughter

> *Laugh, laugh while you still can! For you will be crying for a very long time when you wash these clothes clean with your blood*
> Cassius Dio qtd. in Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome,* 4[80]

It may seem odd that Bataille sees *any* connection between laughter and his philosophy, let alone laughter, religion and the sacrificial.[81] Yet Bataille wrote

[80] According to Mary Beard's reading of Cassius Dio's *Roman History* (which she uses in the introduction to her 2014 work *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up*) the Ancient Roman politician and general Lucius Postumius Megellus (consul 305 BCE) uttered this threat when, at the start of hostilities between the Romans and Greeks in the Greek town of Tarentum, the Tarentines made fun of the formal Roman toga (4).

countless essays on the intersection between the two, and in his fictions his characters are often gripped by manic fits of laughter.[82] For Kendall, Bataille produces a philosophy of laughter and a philosophy that is built on the very experience of laughter:

> [T]his laughter is the laughter that shatters all hierarchies, all distinctions. Laughter, finally, like tears, like art, like poetry, like meditation, like eroticism, like religious ecstasy, is one among many effusions, one among many deliriums, one among many means to the impossible. (Introduction, *Unfinished System* xxxix)

But Bataille believed that it was this very pressure to seek out rapturous moments of self-negation that could stifle our touching on the impossible – after all, we cannot perpetually achieve ecstasy through sacrifice or eroticism. But it is in laughter that we can share moments of ecstatic joy, ecstatic communication:

> When the need to communicate through loss of self is reduced to that of possessing more, then we realize that nothing sublime can exist in man without its necessarily evoking laughter. Now, of all the sorts of intense communication, none is more common than the laughter which stirs us in (each other's) company. (Bataille, "Sacrifice" 68)

Laughter, for Bataille, is a communal activity, it can be shared between two people, and it can be rendered in a mass, and, like yawning, it is contagious. As with his other essays on laughter, "Nietzsche's Laughter," and "Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears," Bataille makes explicit reference to the theorists who have most influenced his writing on laughter; not surprisingly, Bataille is most influenced by the work of Henri Bergson. In "Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears," Bataille discusses the central image that Bergson uses in his 1900 work *Le rire* (*Laughter*): the comedic instance of a man falling over. Bataille asks: why do we laugh when we see someone fall? Do we laugh *at* them or *with* them? However, before I examine Bataille's response to this specific question it is important to clarify that Bataille didn't feel that Bergson's work fully explained the nature or causes of laughter. Bataille felt that

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[81] For further reading see Bataille's essays "Sacrifice," "Nietzsche's Laughter," "Nonknowledge, Laughter and Tears," "Unknowing: Laughter and Tears," "To Die Laughing," and the subsection of his book *Guilty*, entitled "The Divinity of Laughter," which contains the chapters "The Need for Laughter" and "Laughter and Trembling."

[82] See Bataille's 1928 novella *Story of the Eye* and his 1941 short story "Madame Edwarda."

Bergson didn't so much offer an explanation of laughter as he did the comedic. Bataille believed that there are many other instances (other than comedy) where laughter is the response: "the laughter of the accidental meeting [of two old friends], the laughter of tickling, the child's immediate laughter" *(Unfinished System* 134). Bataille saw all of these moments (the chance meeting of friends, tickling, or of watching someone fall) as conforming to his notion of 'slipping between realms.'

Bataille remarks that, we laugh very heartily when we pass, without any warning, from a state of certainty, rationality and stability, to a state where this assurance and stability are overthrown and are revealed to be deceptive (*Unfinished System* 135). When we laugh we slip from a sphere where we can anticipate the future, to a sphere where it is utterly impossible to predict the future.

Bataille understood sacrifice, like laughter, as a moment where people slip from one state to another – from a rational, reasonable state of certainty, to a state of overwhelming uncertainty. That is, in sacrifice the rupture of a violent death pierces the isolation of the individuals who make up a crowd and, through their shared anguish and desire at viewing the death of the victim, forges a momentary sense of community and communication among the spectators. Bataille revisits this sacrificial narrative in his reading of Bergson's 'falling man.' Bataille sees the 'falling man' as a variation of the sacrificial victim, and the people who laugh at the falling man, the spectators at the sacrifice.[83] Bataille, of course, forms a very different interpretation of Bergson's anecdote: for Bergson, we laugh at the falling person because they have not only failed to 'adapt' themselves to the situation at hand (that, for example, there was a rock in their path that they tripped on), but also because they continued in their trajectory rather than conforming to the situation at hand. That is, the human has momentarily lost their status as a human and has become more a 'mechanical error' in a system – they fall out of the system; the human momentarily loses their autonomy and becomes a thing that is acted upon. For Bataille, however, "[t]he man who unwittingly falls is substituting for the victim who is put to death [in a sacrifice], and the shared joy of laughter is that of sacred communication" ("Sacrifice" 68). As Bataille says:

[83] It is worth considering laughter and 'the fall' in the dramatic work of Samuel Beckett – especially the vaudeville tactics employed in his plays *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Waiting for Godot*. These characters' actions, antics and misfortunes become metaphysical (the characters become metaphysical clowns).

> An individual's fall has only to reveal the illusory nature of stability, and the witnesses of that fall pass, with him, from a world in which all is stable to one of slips and slides. Barriers collapse, and the convulsive moments of those laughing break free and reverberate in unison. ("Sacrifice" 69)

But of course laughter and sacrifice are not identical, and they do not produce the same outcomes. Perhaps the biggest difference Bataille sees between laughter and sacrifice is the communication of anguish. While laughter is connected with anguish, anguish is not the sole cause of laughter, but often a tension that is similar to anguish precedes laughter: "*when anguish arises, the laughter begins*" ("Sacrifice" emphasis in original 70). What is dispelled in laughter, Bataille claims, is the *possibility* of anguish, rather than a real, true experience of it. Bataille believes that the anguish at stake *through* laughter is not our own, but rather the anguish of others. What is communicated in sacrifice is anguish, and this anguish doesn't necessarily disipate through the proceedings of the sacrifice. In mass laughter, where a group of people laugh together, Bataille believes that what is communicated is the *cancellation* of this anguish (73).

In "The Laughter of Being" Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen works to answer the question of who or what exactly is being laughed at in the case of the falling person. According to Borch-Jacobsen, true Bataillean laughter "only bursts forth, solar and ravishing, on the condition of dying of laughter, of letting oneself be ripped apart by the hiccoughs of an impaling stake" (148). However, Borch-Jacobsen says that it is impossible to laugh sovereignly at oneself for to do so would mean to *die* laughing – to *be* the victim rather than the spectator. Therefore he proposes that it is necessary to laugh at someone else (to experience the fall/death) of someone else (162). Thus no one ever laughs alone; laughter is always communal. Bataille believes that laughter is not divine and sovereign "because it hovers over miserable human finitude" but rather laughter is divine and sovereign since it "falls along with that finitude into the impossible, into night" (Borch-Jacobsen 158). Borch-Jacobsen understands Bataillean sovereign laughter as that which "resides *within the fall*" (emphasis in original 158).

Borch-Jacobsen also notes the connection between Bataille's theory of laughter and his notions of productivity and useless expenditure: not only is laughter itself an unproductive activity that achieves no real purpose and that persists outside of coherent, utilitarian language, but the 'topic' of laughter is, Bataille observes, often

a narrative in which someone fails to carry out a productive task.[84] As Borch-Jacobsen suggests, we laugh at the person who falls because we are aware of their failure to achieve an otherwise productive goal – to arrive at a meeting on time, to be so driven by their desire to be productive that they do not see the crack in the sidewalk. Their fall also serves no purpose and is not productive in any way: the fall is glorious precisely because it is an end without means, not a means to an end (Borch-Jacobsen 161).

Bataille believes that there are many sorts of laughter, but of all possible forms, Bataille is most fascinated with tragic laughter – the sort of laughter that Nietzsche experienced when describing his foundering characters. According to Borch-Jacobsen's reading of "Nietzsche's Laughter," Bataille talks of a tragic form of laughter that imitates the Passion of the Christ. "Here the *gasps* of laughter are like the Stations of the Cross, all the more divine in that they participate in the divinity of the agony" (Borch-Jacobsen, my emphasis 158). This is the sort of divine laughter, Borch-Jacobsen says, where the laugher "dies of laughter and laughs dying" (158). Bataille, it seems, is interested in a near-breathless laughter, in which the laugher is on the brink of dying *from* laughing.[85]

It is the very *physicality* of laughter in Bataille's theory that situates Bataille as a philosopher of laughter.[86] Bataille's 'philosophy' of laughter, or, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen might say, his 'philosophy' of intoxication, is clearly influenced by the work of Poe and Baudelaire – specifically, Baudelaire's 1869 posthumously published poem "Get Drunk" (Borch-Jacobsen 151; Bataille, *Guilty* 80). Borch-Jacobsen even compares the *style* of Bataille's philosophy of laughter to that of other theorists, including Bergson, Hegel and Heidegger. According to Borch-Jacobsen, these three theorists wrote and *lived* a sober philosophy, whereas Bataille not only wrote but also lived a philosophy of intoxication (151). Borch-Jacobsen argues that

[84] Indeed, laughter, it seems, also erupts when language fails, when, for example, we are unable to explain what is so strange about bumping into an old acquaintance.

[85] That is, laughter is ecstatic in the etymological sense: it brings about a moment of standing outside of yourself. For Bataille, laughter "brings a movement of communion so sudden that [the laughers] stand abashed" ("Sacrifice" 69).

[86] Bataille was once accused of promoting a 'forced' form of laughter – an accusation that came to him in his 1944 lecture/discussion on sin. To this charge, Bataille replied: "forced laughter is the most foreign to me" (*Unfinished System* 70).

Bataille's writing explores the experiential aspect of laughter, where other theorists avoid coming into contact with the phenomenon altogether.[87]

But Bataille also makes his work 'laughable' in another way: while Bataille writes of the gory and grotesque, the tragic and the taboo, the sacred and the sacrificial, he does so with a sense of irony. In her article "Irony/Humor in the Fast Lane: The Route to Desire in *L'Abbe C.*," Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons argues that Bataille's 1950 novella *L'Abbe C.* possesses ironical and humorous qualities that are present not only through the central narrative of the work, in which a priest (the titular L'Abbe C.) gives into temptation, but also through the novella's metanarrative – Bataille's statement about language's (in)ability to narrate desire. This dual ironic/humorous "itinerary" (Boldt-Irons, "Irony/Humor") is also present not only in Bataille's other fictions, for example, in Bataille's description of Simone "who had lightly pissed down her leg" (*Story of the Eye* 56) in the church of Don Juan in Spain, but also appears in Bataille's theoretical work, which takes on paradoxical and, at times, parodic tones. Bataille employs these paradoxical and parodic tones through his refusal to conform to a 'system' of philosophy, preferring instead to write a philosophy that is bound up with the biographical, the theological and the intoxicated, or at other times a philosophy that exposes the mechanics of the very style that it is critiquing. As Laura Wittman says in her interview with Robert Harrison, Bataille makes his writing deliberately choppy, deliberately difficult to read or understand. While the *themes* of Bataille's theoretical work border on the humorous, the playful, the absurd, the horrifying, his written *style* also takes a turn from more traditional academic and philosophical forms of writing.[88]

6.2 The Literature of Sacrifice: Bataille, Fiction and Poetry

> *When I speak of literature it is not with a capital L; it is, rather, an allusion to certain movements which have worked around the limits*

[87] Borch-Jacobsen says that for Bataille laughter and the theorisation of laughter are, obviously, not the same thing. He believes that Bataille was generally dissatisfied with theories of laughter because he, Bataille, felt that theorists shied away from or disapproved of the experiential side of their work.

[88] This can be seen in Bataille's interest in unusual essay topics, like his theoretical papers on the big toe, the language of flowers, the sun, the mouth, the anus, the obelisk. Indeed, Bataille's entire philosophy of nonknowledge is, in a way, a self-referential joke: it pokes fun at philosophy's etymological origins: *philo* 'loving' and *Sophia* 'knowledge' – Bataille, effectively claims nonknowledge within a field that 'loves knowledge.' For reference, see Bataille's collected works in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*.

> *of our logical concepts, certain texts which make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as divisible and questionable.*
>
> Jacques Derrida, "Dialogue," 162

In his introduction to Bataille's 1944 war journal, *Guilty*, Kendall says that for all of its publicity as a 'war diary,' *Guilty* is not exactly a record of the war. Rather, *Guilty* was given its title because it is a work of 'guilt': "a diary of inactivity [. . .] a record of uselessness [. . .] a book written under erasure" (Translator's Introduction, *Guilty* ix). The work, for Kendall, is not much of a diary at all. *Guilty* is a mixture of things:

> a diary and a workshop, an accounting and an experiment. The jittery prose veers wildly, jumping between topics and tasks, in search of a ground but reveling in groundlessness, literally and literarily falling apart. (Kendall, Translator's Introduction, *Guilty* x)

Kendall's description of *Guilty* can also be applied to Bataille's other works (to works like *Inner Experience*), in which Bataille infuses diary with theory and prayer, admits that he is intoxicated while writing or, in his "Method of Meditation," he confesses that he "fell asleep" while composing his treatise (*Unfinished System* 81).

In "Death, Communication and the Experience of Limits," Michael Richardson contextualises Bataille's work within a modernist context, saying that for Bataille, as for the Surrealists, social language exists in the realm of utilitarianism (*Georges Bataille* 111).[89] That is, everyday forms of written and spoken 'communication' function as a means to an end. Both Bataille and the Surrealists – and here it must be noted that Bataille had a very contentious relationship with the Surrealists – felt that this very form of 'communication' was not communication at all. Rather, social language, by its very nature, inhibited communication (Richardson 111).[90] But, "if I reject the utilitarian function of literature," Richardson asks,

> [how] can I use language to communicate, [if] the process of writing down or publishing a work [implies] in itself a compromise with the very utility that one hoped to deny? (111).[91]

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[89] This was a concern for other philosophers like Julia Kristeva, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and the Dadaists, and, broadly, modernist artists.

[90] In his introduction to Bataille's *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, Michael Richardson says that Bataille called himself Surrealism's "old enemy from within," and saw himself as standing at the periphery of the surrealist movement (1).

[91] Consider the curious case of Bataille's lover, Colette Peignott (aka Laure/l'or/Claude Araxe), who grappled with the problem of writing and communication (indeed, one strain of modernism is the

I have already said that, Laura Wittman believes that Bataille attempted to overcome what he saw as the objectification or devaluing of language by creating works that 'inhabited the edge,' by writing fiction and theory in which both theme and style were "disturbing and difficult and deliberately unpleasant" to read (Harrison). There are different interpretations of Bataille's poetic theory and unadorned fiction – Robert Harrison, for one, says of Bataille's work: "I tend to feel wretched when I'm forced to read him" and, "When I read him, I have the sense that I'm reading someone who's using writing as a mode of therapy, and not a very successful one all the time either." In 1925, on his friends' and colleagues' advice, Bataille underwent psychoanalysis. His analyst, and, curiously, the person who presented Bataille with the photographs of the Chinese torture victim, Fou-Tchou-Li, was the French psychologist and analyst Adrien Borel.[92] While Surya remarks that Bataille would not have had the patience to submit himself properly to analysis, it is clear that, under Borel's instructions, Bataille was prompted to write. While undergoing analysis, Bataille wrote *The Story of the Eye*, which Borel was said to have read (Surya 97). Though it is unclear when exactly, or for just how long, Bataille underwent analysis, Surya says that Bataille would have met with Borel sometime between abandoning his novel *W.C.* and completing *Story of the Eye* – sometime around 1928 (Surya 97).

That Bataille used writing for therapeutic purposes is not surprising because so many other authors were using their fiction in the same way. That Bataille used his writing as a form of *sacrifice* is, perhaps, a little harder to grasp. According to Bataille, artistic productions, whether literature, visual art, theatre or music, can be divided into two categories; those that offer "*real* expenditures" and those that give way to "*symbolic* expenditure" (*Visions* 120). Bataille believes that architecture, music and dance constitute this first 'real' (perhaps, we might say, *physical* or *literal*) form of expenditure, while literature and theatre (those forms of art which not only provoke horror and dread through *symbolic* portrayals of tragedy, but also render laughter) are examples of the second, 'symbolic,' category. But of all forms of

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questioning of the ability to communicate at all). According to Michael Richardson, Peignott 'solved the problem' of social language and communication in a very practical and straightforward way: "she never published anything in her lifetime, and she did not even show anything she had written to Bataille" (*Georges Bataille* 111).

[92] I say, 'curious' because the photos are ghastly images of extreme suffering – not the usual sort of thing that a therapist or counselor would, today, give their patient. Borel gave Bataille the dreadful 1905 images of Chinese torture victim, Fou-Tchou-Li.

literature that inhabit this second category, Bataille takes the most care in his exploration of poetry:

> The term poetry, applied to the least degraded and least intellectualized forms of the expression of a state of loss, can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss. Its meaning is therefore close to that of sacrifice. (*Visions* 120)

In Bataille's vision, modernist poetry is the very opposite of utilitarianism. He believes that poetry is sacred because it is an example of denudation because, of all writing, it is the form that is most 'stripped,' most 'violated,' the form that draws most attention to the nature of language itself, and therefore is most aligned with the rupturing of social language.[93] Poetry, Bataille argues, is a form of communication while social language is not – it gives poets and readers access to a mode of communication that regular language cannot (Bataille qtd. in Richardson, *Georges Bataille* 112).[94]

In "Surrealism and the Practice of Writing, or The 'Case' of Bataille," John Lechte discusses poetry's denudation and rupturing of language through his account of Bataille's intellectual and artistic divorce from the Surrealists. Like Wittman and Richardson, Lechte proposes that, "for Bataille, writing itself constitutes a challenge to existing modes of integration in that it places the idea of a homogenous subject under pressure" ("Surrealism" 120). Lechte observes that, while the Surrealists privileged metaphor, Bataille tended to employ metonym in his fiction. Lechte is not alone in his assertion, for in Roland Barthes' 1962 essay "The Metaphor of the Eye" (which is a response to Bataille's 1928 novella *Story of the Eye*) Barthes argues that Bataille employs metonym as a way of disrupting social language's 'distancing' that social language forms (126). Barthes observes that Bataille rejected metaphor because he felt that it was only another way of showing the *similarities* between things, whereas metonym demonstrated the *contiguity* between things: "the metaphor that varies [associations between symbols] exhibits a controlled difference between them

[93] Bataille believes that "communication only happens between two beings at risk" (*Unfinished System* 29).

[94] Bataille initially published his 1962 collection of stories, essays and poetry, *The Impossible*, under the title *La Haine de la Poésie – The Hatred of Poetry*. In his preface to *The Impossible* Bataille notes the obscurity of such a title, saying that for him poetry could only be grasped through hatred and that it possessed no real power except in "*the violence of revolt*" (emphasis in original 10). For Bataille, "poetry attains this violence only by evoking the impossible" (emphasis in original 10).

that the metonym that interchanges them immediately sets out abolishing" (Barthes 125). Thus Barthes says that, in Bataille's fiction, symbols become blurred, objects are no longer separate from one another (125), and as readers we experience Bataille's notion of 'slippage.' That is, within each metaphor in *Story of the Eye*, symbols metonymically exchange symbolic meaning and, for Barthes, become at the same time "identical and other" to each other (125).[95] The metonym is therefore both a violation of language; as Barthes says, it is "nothing but a forced syntagma, the violation of a limit to the signifying space" (126), but it is also additive because it allows a sense of contagion and blurring among symbols.

Lechte believes that Bataille's writing "*qua* writing" is the result of the tension between what Jacques Lacan calls the metonym of desire (which, according to Bataille, leads the writer to write), and the themes in Bataille's writing (sacrifice, death, eroticism) ("Surrealism" 126).[96] This collision, Lechte says, between Bataille's themes and style, brings writing to a point of death: "This, then," Lechte declares, "is indeed a writing to the point of exhaustion and loss" (126). And it was Bataille's rendering of both thematic and stylistic projections of exhaustion and loss that saw Bataille diverge from the Surrealists. "[S]o concerned were [the Surrealists] with the *themes* of Bataille's fiction" – the themes of death and sacrifice and eroticism – that they failed to consider "the *practice* of his writing" (Lechte 126). That is, the Surrealists could not fathom the reality of death that was 'embodied' in Bataille's writing practice and style (126). Lechte aptly articulates 'death' in Bataille's practice and form when he describes Bataille's writing style as "unadorned" (126). He even draws on twentieth-century French writer Marguerite Duras' response to Bataille's fiction, which she said possessed an 'absence of style' (Duras qtd. in Lechte 126).

It is important to pause on this comment: that, for Duras, Bataille's fiction may possess an 'absence' of style. Certainly it is true that Bataille's fictions, particularly his *Story of the Eye* and his posthumously published 1966 novel *My Mother*, contain sparse description and are written in a largely expositional style. Such brief and clipped 'erotic fiction' no doubt contrasts with Bataille's theoretical work, which, as I have said, takes on a more poetic, and florid form (incorporates

[95] For example Bataille's associating the eye with the egg, the egg with the testicle, the sun with a stream of urine, the cunt with a bowl of milk.

[96] Lacan believed that human desire was a metonym because the thing that is desired is *perpetually* lost (Lechte 126).

prayer, and intoxicated musings).[97] Despite Lechte's and Duras' statements that Bataille's work is 'absent' of style, notorious twentieth-century Japanese author Yukio Mishima understands Bataille as using a "hidden, strict, classical structure" in his fictions; structures that Bataille no doubt 'chokes' and perverts ("Georges Bataille and Divinus Deus" 16).[98] Mishima says that in *My Mother* Bataille uses the form of a classic French psychological novel, where an enormous amount of emphasis is placed on internal characterisation and internal monologue. *My Mother* is told from the first person, inside the protagonist, Pierre's, mind, and, as I have said, is largely expositional: as readers, we are *told* what happens, rather than *shown*. What is also interesting about this story is the way that Bataille incorporates biographical elements – his religious devotion and his father's skepticism; his father's illness (in reality, his father's syphilitic paralysis and blindness), and his father's alcoholism.

Mishima believes that the succinctness of Bataille's style does not produce a fiction that is 'absent' of style; does not dilute affect. Rather, according to Mishima Bataille's fiction is anti-realism and conveys a sense of erotic intellectualism. It delivers "vivid, harsh, shocking and immediate connection between metaphysics and the human flesh" ("Divinus Deus" 11). Mishima also proposes that, in his fictions, Bataille incorporates elements of the *bildungsroman*, where he initiates his readers into an "education in corruption" (18). That is, the narrator of the story, be it Pierre from *My Mother* or the unnamed protagonist from *Story of the Eye*, represents the reader's own "naïve investigative desire" (18) – a desire that not only locates both *My Mother* and *Story of the Eye* as coming-of-age stories, but which may also explain the direct but unadorned language that Bataille uses in his fictions. What is achieved through telling the story in first person is that the reader, in Mishima's view, is 'faced with the truth,' a truth that the reader would otherwise avoid, be it an erotic, violent or deadly truth; the horrific truth, Mishima says, that one witnesses when they witness God (18).[99]

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[97] And indeed, Benjamin Noys supports my proposition that Bataille's theory is, on occasion, more fictional than his fiction, when he says that "Bataille's 'theoretical' works can have moments that are more literary than his literary writings" ("Transgressing Transgression" 318).

[98] I say 'notorious,' for his violent, homoerotic fiction and for his absurd/spectacular suicide atop the Tokyo Defense Force tower after a failed *coup d'état* (carried out with his secret militia *Tatenokai*) in 1970.

[99] But for all the horror that we witness in Bataille's work, for all of the eroticism and corruption that Bataille's fiction explores, Benjamin Noys defends Bataille's work against those who would call it 'transgressive fiction.' In "Transgressing Transgression: The Limits of Bataille's Fiction," Noys says that to define Bataille's work as 'transgressive' is flawed because doing so limits transgression to a

In "Bataille and the Writing of Sacrifice," David Kilpatrick argues that, by engaging in a stylistic analysis of Bataille's prose and theory, it is possible to discern Bataille's notion of sacrifice. Kilpatrick declares that the very mechanics and conventions of Bataille's literary style recreate the experience (the mixed horror and desire) and impossibility of sacrifice, and that Bataille communicates the experience of sacrifice through a form of "language [that] enters finite transcendence as authorial subjectivity abandons itself through an *ek-stasis*, an opening or laceration" (1). Mishima expresses the same sentiment: that Bataille is no doubt aware that the quality of experience – be it sacrificial or erotic – "is something impossible for language to reach" ("Divinus Deus" 12). However, Mishima believes that "Bataille still expresses [the impossible] in words. It is the verbalization of a silence called God" (12).

It is important here to remark on the differences between romantic and modernist writing. While the Romantics believed that it was possible to achieve transcendence through language, the modernists (including Bataille), regarded this belief with suspicion. Bataille abandons himself in his texts through a labyrinthine passage of words, through a sacrifice of language, through, for example, his use of ellipses, which do not express indecision, but rather denote a moment that goes beyond words. Bataille also uses subordinate clauses and additive-, agglomerative-sentences; he repeatedly leaves sentences unfinished; images succeed each other bewilderingly; he blurs the boundaries between poetry and prose; and Bataille's modernist style also explores the death of the 'I.' This combination of ellipsis and additive sentences gives Bataille's writing a breathless quality, as though he is trying to say everything at once. Bataille's writing might be compared to a sketch artist feathering hairs – Bataille adds and adds and adds. This, after all, is the writing of excess.

Bataille's 1962 book *The Impossible* comprises a collection of works that take on this very additive style. The works explore the nature of poetry and are pieces that are written in an essay-story form. One of the stories, "A Story of Rats" contains the following meandering (although impulsive and violent), dreamlike passage:

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particular representation *of* 'transgressiveness,' when instead, for Bataille, 'transgression' is concerned with the disruption of *all* limits.

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. . . . . A., his teeth chattering on the threshold, hurls himself at B., strips her naked, tears off her clothes in the cold. At that moment the father arrives (not Father A. but the father of B.), the weasel-faced little man, beaming like a fool, saying softly: "I knew it, it's a farce!" . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . the little man, the father, creeps up, jeering, and straddles the mad couple on the threshold (spread out in the snow, and next to them – bearing in mind the cassock, and above all *the sweat of death* – shit would look pure to me): he cups his hands (the father, his eyes glittering with spite) and cries in a low voice: "Erdon!" . . . . . .

. . . . . .

. . . . . (*The Impossible* ellipses in original text 50)

What is immediately intriguing about this passage is Bataille's repetitive and excessive use of ellipses – clearly, Bataille isn't overly concerned with ending sentences or trains of thought, jumping, as he does, from, one idea to another. According to the *OED*, the three dots of 'ellipsis' suggest an "omission from speech or writing of a word or words that are superfluous or able to be understood from contextual clues." The word 'ellipsis' is derived from the Greek *elleipsis*, from *elleipein* meaning to 'leave out' ("Ellipses"). But this definition of 'ellipsis' does not capture the way that Bataille employs ellipses. Bataille doesn't use ellipses to suggest that he has left something out or that he didn't know what to say. Rather, he uses ellipses to suggest that saying *anything* would limit and detract from the magnitude of the experience. Bataille uses ellipses to speak for the impossible, for the impossibility of speech. The ellipses in this case are still silences or absences in speech, as the *OED* suggests, but this silence or absence of speech comes about for a very different reason and does not act as an omission.[100] Kilpatrick explains Bataille's use of ellipses as moments where

[100] Indeed, Bataille wrote extensively on the relationship between language and silence. In his introduction to *Guilty*, Bataille says that "My language, can only be completed by death" (3). Later, in his chapter on "The Point of Ecstasy," he tells his readers how he attained ecstasy: "First I had to create the greatest silence in myself" (28).

> language is experienced in its essence. We are most aware of language – we most sense its immediacy – precisely when it escapes us. Ellipses do not indicate an omission or suppression of language, but language exceeding itself (the language of ecstasy). (7)

This very idea – that Bataille is writing a form of prose in which language is tested and challenged to the extent that it exceeds itself in the form of ellipsis – speaks to both Bataille's writing style and his notion of sacrifice. As I have noted, Bataille understands sacrifice as a form of expenditure that rejects all forms of utilitarian production. His style, which can be called a sacrifice of form, opposes utilitarian language, opposes the reification of language. That is, Bataille opposes utterance if the experience goes beyond articulation. And yet Bataille, forever the paradoxical philosopher, also attempts to articulate himself up to the point of the unutterable. For example, his *Story of the Eye* is a fiction where, for the author, the characters and his readers, the 'eye' cannot stop seeing the depravity and horrors before it. As readers we witness Bataille's characters asphyxiate, we watch a character fellate a priest, we see a bull gore a bullfighter and tear out his eye. And yet as readers we are also 'blinded' (as when we look at the sun) by having seen too much, whether this is because we avert our eyes from the prose, or because, as Noys suggests, 'overly-transgressive' themes can sometimes lead a story to become repetitive and, strangely, bland: "a writing which appears to be *most* transgressive can, in fact, be the *least* transgressive" ("Transgressing Transgression" 308).[101]

But of course Bataille wasn't the only author/theorist who was concerned with the social degradation of language. While the two were often at loggerheads, Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre occasionally found common ground, and the drive to escape social language was one such meeting point. A meeting point, yes, but a point at which they still drastically diverged. Sartre explores the anxiety of language in his 1938 novel *Nausea*, where he thematically and stylistically develops a sense of the deadening of the novel. Such a response to the social use of language is no doubt very different from Bataille's reaction: there is no lack of affect in Bataille – his fiction, unlike Sartre's, is almost over intensively 'felt.' In his introduction to *Guilty* Kendall observes that *Nausea* can be read as the opposite of Bataille's work (Translator's

[101] Consider Darren Jorgensen's "The Impossible Thought of *Lingchi* in Georges Bataille's *The Tears of Eros*," and his discussion on looking at photographs of human suffering and atrocity (for example, of looking at the images of Fou-Tchou-Li).

Introduction, *Guilty* xii). While the protagonist in Sartre's fictional journal comes to gain a level of awareness of their 'place in time,' the 'protagonist' in Bataille's real journal is a person (an author, perhaps) who has become, as Kendall says, displaced, in a Nietzschean sense, in time (Translator's Introduction, *Guilty* xii).

But to suggest that Bataille attempted to bring about sacrifice *through* fiction, through poetry – that is, to create something that brings about a rupture in everyday life; something that pierces the isolation between people and leads to communication – is also to propose that Bataille understood literature as bound up with sin and evil. As Bataille said in his 1944 lecture/discussion on sin, in order to communicate we must desire evil because communication is inextricably connected to suicide and crime (*Unfinished System* 30). Bataille saw literature as so caught up with sin and evil that he gave his 1957 work the fittingly provocative title: *Literature and Evil*. *Literature and Evil* was Bataille's response to Sartre's 1947 book *What is Literature?* in which Sartre proposes that, in order for literature to be able to communicate anything to a reader, it must contain an essence of morality – literature, Sartre believed, possessed a moral function.[102] Bataille, however, believes that this morality (or what he would go on to call 'hypermorality') is connected to evil: "Evil – an acute form of Evil – which [literature] expresses, has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a 'hypermorality'" (Kendall, Introduction, *Unfinished System* ix). This hypermorality, Bataille remarks, emerges from writers' collusion with evil (a complicity, which is necessary for communication to take place). It is a communication that is based (of all things) on loyalty. Thus in his introduction in *Literature and Evil* Bataille claims: "Literature is *communication*" (emphasis in original ix).

In the only ever televised interview with Bataille, an interview which aired in 1958, presenter Pierre Dumayet asks whether the title of Bataille's book *Literature and Evil* indicates that evil and literature are inseparable, to which Bataille responds:

> Yes, I think so [. . .]. [I]t seems to me that if literature stays away from evil, it rapidly becomes boring. […] I think that soon it becomes clear, that literature has to deal with anguish and that anguish is based on something that is going the wrong way, something that no doubt will turn into something very evil. [. . .]

[102] As Sartre says: "Although literature is one thing and morality a quite different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative, we discern the moral imperative" (*What is Literature?* 62-63).

> [W]hen the reader is in that unpleasant situation the result is a tension which makes literature non-boring. (Bataille, Interview with Pierre Dumayet).

According to Bataille, literature (and authors) must plead guilty to its/their own evil. Among all the other permutations of evil that Bataille sees as implicit in 'non-boring' literature, he argues that, like the spectacle of sacrifice (or rapturous moments of erotic passion, or laughter), "writing is the opposite of working [. . .]. Amusing books are efforts that went against real work" (Bataille, Interview with Pierre Dumayet). Bataille explains this no doubt seemingly bizarre statement in his chapters on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and the work of Franz Kafka – Kafka who, Bataille believed, was stricken with a sense of powerlessness, of being caught up in systems, and of being shadowed by overbearing patriarchal figures. Kafka who, Bataille also believed, reveled in his own accursed status: his resolve to work in insurance and law, and yet his child-like rebellion which prompted him to write in his spare time. For Bataille, the definitive element or aspect of literature is this very return to childhood (*Literature and Evil* x). The child is always subordinate to the adult, but the child (in their subordination) nurtures feelings of resentment, rebelliousness and envy towards the adult (*Literature and Evil* 38). If, when the child is an adult, they can pretend to take on the responsibilities of an adult "but without acknowledging the obligations connected with them" they can obtain a 'limp form of liberty' – a form of liberty that, as Bataille sees it, "is traditionally the poet's prerogative" (39). Thus Bataille believes that the poet/author either evades the utilitarian realm of work and produces poems or stories that have no real use value, or the poet/author suffers like those condemned: forced into the world of work yet nevertheless still producing art that has no use value. This is the very point of *Literature and Evil*: humans, Bataille says, cannot recognise themselves or love themselves "unless [they are] condemned" (39).

The condemnatory nature of literature and the unproductive work of the author both coalesce in Bataille; Bataille, who wrote fiction and who, as an author, 'worked' to develop a thematically and stylistically sacrificial form of literature. Yet sacrifice wasn't just something that Bataille wrote about; it was something that he attempted to experience, to live. Bataille's belief that sacrifice was connected with laughter and literature demonstrates the way that his investigations into sacrifice were not just of an anthropological bent. Sacrifice pervades all of Bataille's work and every

facet of his life – from his creation of the secret society *Acéphale* and his mysticial meditations, to his attack on the bourgeoisie, and throughout his theory of the origins of human civilisation. Bataille used the metaphor and myth of sacrifice to explain his resacralising of communication and community, to clarify his resacralising of the material world, to explicate his economic theory and, as I have explored, to elucidate his position on laughter and literature. Through all of these seemingly disconnected aspects of human life and human history, Bataille has developed a curious cohesion, a network of ideas, that unite in and are united by his theory of sacrifice.

7. To Practice the Impossible: Writing Bataille, Not Writing *Like* Bataille

> *Literature is communication.*
>
> Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, ix

> *Literature is itself a crime.*
>
> Nick Land, *Thirst For Annihilation* 73

> *The heart of literature is the death of God.*
>
> Nick Land, *Thirst For Annihilation*, xix

I have, in an earlier footnote, made reference to Benjamin Noys' belief that to read Bataille's work is, in a way, to fail Bataille. Noys opens his book on Bataille, *Georges Bataille: An Introduction*, by stating that any attempt to 'assimilate or appropriate' Bataille is a transgression, for "Bataille did not seek admirers and he regarded his apologists with suspicion" (1). In the same way that Nick Land opens *Thirst For Annihilation* with a confession that "[t]o succeed in writing a book of any kind about Bataille is already something wretched" (xii), I too would like to offer my own sympathies. Perhaps I, too, have failed the Grand Master. While there may be a certain truth to Noys' and Land's claims, I nevertheless believe that in order to have any understanding or appreciation of Bataille's work, it is necessary not only to

illustrate his theory through theory, but also to make an *example* of it through fiction.[103]

Just as Bataille developed his own way of writing himself through the problem of sacrifice, I too have found my own path through that dark forest. While I have been influenced by the content and themes of Bataille's work, his influence on my work has not just been confided to his theory. The core theoretical premise of sacrifice in Bataille's fiction, his religious imagery, his recurring symbolic fixation with eyes and suns, have all informed my own creative work. I have been inspired by these themes, images and symbols with the proviso that I am not in any way attempting to reproduce Bataille's fictional style, although it is almost impossible to avoid picking up some of his stylistic idiosyncrasies (his sentence structures and punctuation). I realise, however, that Bataille's style is deeply connected to the impossibility of writing experience, and to his desire, we might say, to access a sort of inner experience. To extract only the content and theme of Bataille's work is to overlook how integral his style is to his philosophy. Thus I have drawn from Bataille's work without trying to rival or imitate his style (which would be impossible, utterly disastrous, and would constitute a form of betrayal for Benjamin Noys). Any attempt to recreate either his fictional or theoretical work, very much outside of the context in which Bataille was writing, is doomed to failure or ridicule. I have, however, been inspired by Bataille's style, as I attest in the fictional opening of this very exegesis and with the fictional-essay style that I have adopted for one of my short stories. Again, it is important to acknowledge that Bataille, in both his theory and his fiction, blurs generic boundaries between philosophy and fiction.

Like Bataille, who uses or, we may say, sacrifices, various modes, genres and styles (the confessional/diary narrative, the coming-of-age story) to express his ideas, I too am fascinated by the sacrifice of form. In several of my own stories I have employed the conventions of metafiction, which has enabled me not only to reflect on fictional devices, but also to blur genres and styles (I have mixed historical fiction, genre fiction, crime fiction, the confessional/diary narrative, the coming-of-age story, and the literary and the academic essay), to expose the mechanics of fiction and the occasional pomposity of philosophical writing. The five works of long short fiction in

[103] For Noys, as I have already noted, this is not strictly true. According to him: "If we had never read Bataille at all then we would be the best readers of Bataille, but we would never know this unless we had read Bataille" (*Bataille* 128).

my collection are therefore generically hard to classify. Metafiction, or what William H. Gass describes in his 1970 work *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, is this very sort of fiction that is *about* fiction (25). I have also chosen to write several works of metafiction because this self-reflexive style enables me not only to reflect self-consciously on Bataille's biography and his themes and styles, but also allows me to explore the intellectual, social and political context in which he was living and writing. I have used the essay form in some of my stories to limn Bataille's theory of sacrifice, yet also to tease my reader through my blending of fiction and theory, my commingling of fiction and biography, and my analyses of bogus works of fiction. While I take Bataille's life and work seriously, I believe that it is nevertheless possible to have *fun* with his biography, as Bataille no doubt did with the creation of his own multiple identities.[104] Further, this style allows me to make an example of Bataille's fascination with the blurring of fiction and nonfiction. Inspired by the fictional essays of American author Mark Z. Danielewski and Iranian philosopher/author Reza Negarestani, I have chosen to write a story that not only parodies the style of a particular form of the poststructuralist academic essay, but that also pokes fun at the occasional pretentions of twentieth-century French theory. By drawing attention to the conventions of scholarly writing – through my use of footnotes, academic language/jargon, and essay style – I have investigated the way that Bataille carries out a sacrifice of style. Thus I explore a Montaigne-derived sense of the essay or *essai* as a trial, an attempt.

Despite my indebtedness to Bataille's theory, I have not simply employed Bataille's concepts as a set of ideas on which to build my work but, rather, I have used Bataille's work as a way of *prompting* or *feeding* my fiction, rather than determining it – as instigation or provocation, and not as a template. Thus I believe that to try to replicate Bataille's confessional, obsessional, additive, allusive and elliptical style of fiction would not only be impossible, but would also be anachronistic. Obviously, I have also in no way attempted to write pornographies since to do so would only corrupt my reading of Bataille's theory and fiction because I am writing in an entirely different context to that of Bataille; furthermore, the pornographies of the twenty-first century are very different from the 'pornographies'

[104] Consider the hilarious penname under which Bataille originally published his 1928 novella *Story of the Eye* under – Lord Auch, that is, Lord *of the shithouse* (*auch* in French is short for *aux chiottes* ('the toilet'), which can also be used as an insult or a way of telling someone off).

that Bataille was reading (and are clearly very different to the work of the Marquis de Sade, on which Bataille is self-consciously reflecting).

While my fiction draws on Bataille's notion of sacrifice and his reflections on Christianity, I am using his theory of sacrifice as a lens through which to explore sacrifice in broader religious, social and cultural ways. Through my fiction I show that sacrifice continues to fascinate, haunt, and trouble our society and culture even today. My preoccupation with the past's haunting of the present has led me to develop a collection of stories that all possess some form of 'incompletion.' That is, the actions and events in each story occur either before or after the 'fact' of sacrifice (before or after a sacrifice has taken place) but never in the midst of a sacrifice. The sacrifice in each story occurs *outside* of the story (in the same way that in Ancient Greek drama violence always occurs offstage) because of the impossibility of writing or representing sacrifice. The incomplete or unfulfilled sacrifices in my stories also allow me to explore Bataille's notions of unproductivity and purposelessness. While sacrifice is the central theme in my work, sacrifice never occurs. Although the longest story of my collection, "Journal of the Plague Week," is in many ways the most complete story of all (it ends with the most conclusive of endings: a death) it is also the most unproductive: a child falls ill and no one is to blame.

But aside from the work of the author being purposeless and unproductive (a form of evil, as Bataille saw it) how else did Bataille parallel literature with evil? In her exploration into Bataille, literature and evil, Melanie Nicholson says that "*Evil* is a slippery term and nowhere does Bataille provide us with a concise and workable definition" (7). I have already explored Bataille's redefinition and inversion of religious terms like 'good' and 'evil,' where he proposes that evil is intrinsically connected to communication or the desire to communicate, and in *Literature and Evil* this is very much the way that Bataille pursues the concept of 'evil.' For Nick Land, Bataillean literature is "the dark and unholy rending of a sacrificial wound, allowing a communication more basic than pseudo-communication of instrumental discourse" (*Thirst for Annihilation* xix). And it is this dark and unholy rending of a sacrificial wound that Bataille explores in *Literature and Evil*. As a response to Sartre's exploration of literature and morality, Bataille, in *Literature and Evil* clarifies his notion of 'evil' through his concept of "hypermorality": an acute form of evil, which has a sovereign value. The hypermoral value of literature, Bataille believes – the *evil* of literature – is communicated in works that explore, as I have, the human

experiences of perversity, abjection, horror, sexuality, and self/mutilation. It was only through the reader's aversion, disgust and tension brought about through the work of fiction, Bataille believed, that readers could experience a sovereign moment or, as Nicholson says, the author must "*represent* evil in order to produce a certain radical response in the reader" (8-9).

Bataille and Land suggest that in literature the characters must in some way desire or *do* evil. All of the characters in my stories somehow desire evil, or *do* evil. Characters put themselves and others at risk (they perform historical/mythological sacrifices that are today tried as crimes, and they also revel in their desire for the crime (the evil) of sacrifice), they refuse to find productive ends to their self-mutilation, and they are driven the communicate beyond themselves (not with God, who is dead, but with other people, and with the limitless beyond). It is the evil of (the desire for) death, and it is the very theme of death that pervades all of Bataille's philosophy – the literal or metaphorical death of the sacrificial victim, and the religious narrative of a sacrificial death as securing life and securing community.

Bataille, who was obsessed with the idea of translating experience through writing, understood that it was impossible for a reader ever to experience sacrifice (or eroticism) through writing alone, because writing is always representative and cannot ever be the experience itself. Nevertheless, Bataille – with his sacrifice of style, his explicit content – always attempted to shock his readers, to put them at risk. My offstage positioning of sacrifice has also led me to consider the importance of narrative perspective in each of my stories. All of the sacrificial violence in my stories is mediated through the eyes of characters who do not experience sacrifice themselves (or at least, not within the confines of the story). However, all of my characters in some way desire sacrifice. I have written my stories from these points of view to reflect Bataille's belief that the desire to sacrifice was just as, if not more important than, actual sacrifice. The impossibility of experiencing sacrifice through fiction has prompted me to examine the form of the parable – or what Frank Kermode describes as a narrative that is at once a similitude and yet also a riddle; a story that reveals as it hides. Through the five thematically linked long short stories, which I have collectively entitled *Parables of Impossible Bodies*, I reimagine historical and mythological accounts of sacrifice in present-day Australia. The 'impossible bodies' in these stories, the abject, vulnerable bodies of those who would seek to annihilate themselves (with the exception of the child in the final story), to sacrifice themselves,

not to God, but to something *beyond* God – the erotic bodies of self-mutilating, anorexic mystics; the bodies of children who are riddled with disease, or children who plan, very carefully, the steps that are required to castrate themselves.

And it is by writing through the eyes of these characters that I have also become aware of another key theme central to Bataille's notion of sacrifice: *vulnerability*. For Bataille, all of the 'characters' in a sacrifice must be made vulnerable. It is not only the sacrificial victim who is made vulnerable, but also the spectators (in fiction, these spectators are both the other characters in the story, but also the implied readers of the fiction) who must fear and desire the thought of being put at risk, and who must also allow themselves to be put at risk, in order to (have the chance to) communicate. As Bataille says: "I communicate only outside of myself, only in letting myself go or throwing myself outside" (*Unfinished System* 29). It is this vulnerability – this desire to put 'the self' at risk – that informed one of the major principles in all of my stories: my protagonists' drives to escape themselves. In accordance with Laura Wittman's belief that Bataille wanted "to explode this 'self' that is so inconvenient and so artificial" (Harrison), the central characters in my stories try to annihilate themselves through their mystical meditation and their ascetic self-harm (from self-mutilation to self-starvation), and are also driven to annihilate others (a young man ritualistically slaughters a bull). But their desire to be made vulnerable, their desire to escape the prison of their 'self' is always, unwittingly, tied up with their desire to communicate. Just as the recovery of community and communication at the expense of the self is central to Bataille's theory of sacrifice, my characters wound themselves or allow themselves to be wounded in an attempt (wittingly or unwittingly) to open themselves up to communication.

The stories in my collection, like Bataille's fiction, contain recurrent characters, symbols, and intertwining themes. However, these stories are not connected narratively and are not sequential. While individual stories may conform to a particular form of narrative logic, the collection as a whole does not obey an Aristotelian plot with either a climax or a dénouement. These stories do not need to be read in any particular order, although I believe that the longest and final piece in my collection should be read last. My stories are interlinked and associative, and, while it is possible to read them in isolation from one another and in isolation from the exegesis, I believe that they should be read as a collection. Although my exegesis is tightly connected to my fiction, I believe that it is entirely possible to read the fiction

before reading the exegesis. My exegesis is not extraneous to my fiction, and when both are read together it is my hope that the exegesis assists in articulating the thematic and stylistic approaches to sacrifice in my stories. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this exegesis – and for the sake of my examiners – I have decided on an order in which to present my stories.

Like Bataille's work, my stories balance precariously on the edge of realism. In my fiction I have blended the mundane with the *ekstasis* of the sovereign moment, with the ritualistically violent: a young girl on a camping trip with her family contracts bubonic plague, a humble librarian finds an excessively violent photograph while scanning books, a newspaper runs a story about a dairy farmhand who has slaughtered a bull and claimed that the sun told him to sacrifice the animal. Yet because I have written my stories through anthropological, religious and philosophical lenses, I have worked to avoid pathologising my characters or their actions – specifically, I have avoided pathologising the mutilating/self-mutilating actions of my characters: the character who desires his own castration, the character who obtains a form of mystical ecstasy from starving himself, or the character who unwittingly ritually sacrifices an animal. It is true that Bataille underwent psychoanalysis while writing fiction, and it is also true that several characters in his stories are insitutionalised. Nevertheless, I believe that Bataille avoided pathologising his characters and their actions, instead drawing greater attention to the religious logic that governed their sacrificially or erotically violent behaviour.

Curiously, one of the thematic and theoretical elements that characterises Bataille's fiction – and yet, one that has received very little critical attention – is his fascination with children and young adults. Bataille not only believed that in order to write 'well,' an author must "[remain] in touch with [. . .] childhood as the time of 'young savages' with an 'innocent sovereignty'" (Noys, *Bataille* 65), but he also wrote many of his most famously violent and erotic fictions from the perspectives of adolescents – consider the young lovers in *Story of the Eye*, or the oedipal dynamic that emerges in his posthumously published novel *My Mother*.[105] I have explored

[105] For Bataille, the child symbolically stands in opposition to the adult realm of productivity and utility; the child focuses on themselves and their own pleasures regardless of social or cultural ramifications. The child, therefore, exists only in the present and doesn't forego immediacy with concerns for the future. According to Bataille, *good* authors – like Kafka or de Sade – are aware that their literary pursuits are not 'work' in the same way that, for Kafka at least, working for an insurance company was 'work.' However, far from being ashamed by their return to childhood, Bataille believed that authors should revel in their 'childish,' unproductive practice.

Bataille's fascination with the child's point of view in my fiction – I have worked to blend and also reimagine the coming-of-age narrative and the literary tropes of the sacrificial virgin and the child sacrifice. Unlike the popular child/virgin sacrifice narrative, where the victim is captured and (nearly) sacrificed against their will, I have worked to invert these literary tropes by implying that the children in my stories desire their own sacrifice, even (or especially) as they cannot gauge the meaning or consequences of their desires. While I address the bodily horror of puberty with two of my adolescent characters, I explore a range of ages in my stories, from the young (two eleven year-olds, one who contracts bubonic plague and begins menstruation for the first time while in a coma, another who dreams of castrating himself before his voice changes at the onset of puberty) to the young adult (a twenty year-old who ritualistically slaughters a bull before mutilating himself) to the elderly (a self-martyring, self-starving octogenarian). This variation of ages has allowed me not only to articulate the theme of sacrifice through different voices, but has also allowed me to explore the presence of sacrifice as it affects and simultaneously shatters/builds a *community* of characters, and the way that it continues to fascinate and terrify people, reardless of age.

In writing the creative section of my project, I have also been given the chance to discuss elements of Bataillean sacrifice that went beyond the scope of this exegesis. It is through my fiction that I have had the opportunity to explore Bataille's broader theories and to address the discussion that has emerged out of the study of, and critical readings of, Bataille's work. There is no greater collection of symbols in Bataille's work than eyes, testicles and the sun. In *Story of the Eye*, Bataille parallels the three orbs: the first, eye which sees too much before it is poked out, the second, sun which not only illuminates the world and as it blinds us, the sun as both a symbol of God's blind eye as well as an anus, a 'solar anus,' and the third, the slaughtered bull's testicle which, once peeled, is like the eye and sun – a white ball – and which, although it was once the vehicle of sexual reproduction, it has now been excised.[106] I have incorporated these symbols into my stories, not simply as an act of homage to Bataille, but because, when interwoven, these three symbols all touch on broader religious, historical and mythological narratives, for example, the symbolic

[106] Consider Bataille's essay "Solar Anus" (in *Visions of Excess*), in which, among other comparisons and arguments, Bataille proposes a symbolic parallel between the sun and the anus – both excrete waste (the sun, through its 'excretion' of light and heat).

association between eyes and testicles, and blinding as a form of castration.[107] The link between blinding and castration is not new – we need only think of the castrating self-inflicted blindness of Oedipus – and in my story "Anatomy of the Sacred" I explore not only the ritualistic removal of a bull's eyes and testicles, but also the sun's commanding a young farmhand to carry out the ritualistic act: the blind God commanding the blinding of another. The link between blindness and castration has also allowed me to explore the erotic fascination with androgyny and castration that developed because of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European musical phenomenon of the castrato. Thus, in my story "The Singer," I explore a young boy's desire to castrate himself for the sake of art; his blindness, his inability to see the consequences of his actions.

Another of the elements that I have had the chance to explore is Bataille's allusion to the impersonal space of the modern slaughterhouse, which he addresses in his essay "The Slaughterhouse." According to Benjamin Noys, Bataille believes that pre-modern animal slaughter may have its origins in temple sacrifice and may have possessed sacrificial or religious significance.[108] In the modern world, however, consumers are alienated from the slaughtering process in two ways: "firstly," Noys says, "we do not wish to see what happens [in the slaughterhouse] and secondly, its activities turn death into a productive and neutral event" (*Bataille* 24). Noys argues that the public's enforced alienation from the slaughterhouse and from the methods of slaughter effectively blind it from the horror and the reality of animal slaughter. Such ignorance, however, doesn't put an end to the violence or brutality of the slaughtering process but rather changes the slaughterhouse from a space that at one time may have been sacred to something utilitarian. Bataille's investigation into the modern and pre-modern social function of the slaughterhouse has thematically and symbolically prompted my fiction, in which I have explored the religious and sacrificial nature of animal sacrifice – specifically, the sacrifice of the bull in the origin stories of the Roman soldier religion of Mithraism – and the mystical associations with strict vegetarianism.

[107] In *Story of the Eye*, for example, the eye and the testicle become conflated: the castration of the bull is a form of blinding, just as the blinding of the bullfighter and priest symbolise castration.

[108] Bataille opens "The Slaughterhouse," with the assertion that "the slaughterhouse is linked to religion insofar as the temples of by-gone eras [. . .] served two purposes: they were used both for prayer and for killing" (10).

The creative component of my project has also allowed me to explore the connections Bataille makes between sacrifice, religion and *architecture* – specifically, the significance of the obelisk in Bataille's work. While obelisks have their origins in Ancient Egyptian architecture, where they were often placed at the entrances to temples, symbolising petrified rays of sunlight, Bataille rereads this symbolic significance.[109] In his 1938 essay "The Obelisk," Bataille discusses the beheading of Louis XVI, and the actions of king Louis-Phillipe, who in 1836 raised an obelisk at the site of the beheading, at the Place de la Concorde – a public square that had been empty since the statue of Louis XV had been torn down during the Revolution. According to Jesse Goldhammer, Bataille rejects Louis-Phillipe's motivations in raising the obelisk. Bataille believes that the Place de la Concorde is the "space where the death of God must be announced" (*Visions of Excess* 215), because the obelisk cannot replace the fallen king, just as the dead God cannot resurrect. The execution of Louis XVI, Goldhammer says, was not only a literal decapitation, it was also the annihilation of "monarchical authority" (*Headless* 157).[110] The execution, Goldhammer continues, also demolished "the possibility of founding any authority" (157). Thus the obelisk at the Place de la Concorde is not, as Louis-Phillipe may have intended, a monument of peace, but rather turns the square into a place of "permanent disorientation and subversion" (157). In my fiction I have used the symbol of the obelisk to invoke this permanent sense of disorientation and subversion that Goldhammer speaks of. However, I attempt to achieve this disorientation and subversion through the symbolic *obscurity* of the obelisk – the obelisk which, since World War I has become a standard symbol of mourning (geometrically, a relatively simple structure), possesses an occult meaning and is religiously ambiguous. In my story "Night is Also a Sun," the disorientation created through the symbol of the obelisk is the uncertainty of its symbolic value.

It is intriguing that music, as a form of sacrifice, has also entered the realm of my fiction. While Bataille does not discuss music in any great detail, it is true that music played an integral role in his life. In his commentary to his 2014 translation of Bataille's *Louis XXX*, Kendall says that "we should remember the significance if

[109] It is also worth considering the significance that both the sun and obelisks played in Ancient Egyptian religion – specifically its importance to heretic pharaoh Akhenaten and queen Nefertiti, who reigned during the eighteenth dynasty of Egypt (approximately 1353-1336 BCE).

[110] For Bataille, the obelisk also becomes a symbol of a headless person, standing upright (an Acéphalic man (Goldhammer, *Headless* 157; Hollier, *Against Architecture* xxii).

nevertheless minor place of music in [Bataille's] oeuvre" (Postface: Larvatus Prodeo 84). Kendall goes on to say that the headless figure of the *acéphalic* man had been created while Bataille and Masson listened to Mozart's 1787 opera *Don Giovanni* (84). Although Bataille does not say anything of the sacrificial qualities of music, Patrick Barbier, in his 1989 work *The World of the Castrati: The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* makes an intriguing aside: that for da Vinci, music, "however sublime it might be, died as soon as it was born" (89). That is, music, like Bataillean sacrifice, is always momentary. It is the momentariness of both sacrifice and music that situates them as ruptures in an otherwise controlled system. At least, such is the belief of French economist Jacques Attali. Attali, in his 1970 work *Noise*, explores the trichotomy of silence, music and noise, and argues that music is a form of controlled sacrifice.[111] Clearly influenced by the work of Bataille (although without acknowledgment), Attali argues that noise is synonymous with sacrifice because it is the subversion of a religious (Christian) attempt to silence the world. Thus music is the 'chanelliser' (the organised form) of this noise. Attali also proposes that music, before commoditisation, was a form of organised sacrifice: a momentary rupture of the norm, a form of ritual violence. I have used both the erotic and sacrificial qualities of music to feed my fiction: I have examined the paradoxically sensual and yet disembodied nature of a beautiful operatic voice, and I have written about the unrecoverable and otherworldly voices of the castrati (that is, the voices of male singers whose voices were irreversibly altered before the onset of puberty through, we might say, the 'sacrifice,' of castration) mesmerised seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian music.[112]

The final thematic, or, perhaps I should say 'atmospheric,' 'Bataillean element' that informs my fiction is the largely unacknowledged *katabatic* quality of Bataille's life and work: Bataille's descent, his 'going down,' into the underworld, his travelling back in time, and his fascination with and despair at the unrecoverable loss of the sacred. I am aware of this atmosphere as a literary trope (Virgil and Dante both invoke the feeling of 'descending' in their works), and I was intrigued by the

[111] I have become so fascinated with the link between Attali and Bataille, and their observations of sacrifice in music that I have even written and published a conference paper on the very topic – "*Danse Sacrale*: The Political Economy of Noise in a Sacrificial Society."

[112] Castration has also played a tremendously important role in Christianity. Consider the self-castration of early Christian theologian Origen, the tale of the castration of Noah, and even the peculiar practices of the nineteenth-century Russian castration cult, the *Skoptsy*, whose male members were castrated and whose female members had their breasts removed.

possibility of taking my reader back to earlier notions of sacrifice by moving down through archaeological time. Though all set in the present, each of my stories reflect a historical era, event or location: seventeenth-century Italian opera, plague-ravaged medieval Bohemia, the underground cave-like temples of the cult of Mithras. I am, however, also interested in the connection between katabasis and the concept of 'hidden things.' Despite the often explicit nature of Bataille's fiction, Bataille lived a 'hidden' life – a life that took on a mythic status after his death. Theorists and biographers have long puzzled over Bataille's alleged double life and his involvement with the secret society *Acéphale*. I have incorporated the concept of 'hidden things' in my fiction through my exploration of the secret and often obscure and solitary practices of the mystics, and the hermetic and secretive qualities of books and libraries. I have, however, worked to maintain these mythic or hidden qualities. My stories are not revelatory, but are rather unrevelatory. Neither my characters nor my readers end up any closer to discovering any sort of 'truth' than they did at the beginning of the story. In my fiction, secrets remain secrets, hermetic practices remain hermetic. My characters are simultaneously tormented by, and yet also take pleasure in, keeping secrets, or keeping things hidden (or in feeling that they are required to keep things hidden): children secretly steal things from their parents, others feel that they cannot voice the sacrificial horrors that they have witnessed, or the sacrificial practices that they are planning to perform. In all of the stories, my characters are most troubled by and therefore most secretive of their (in many ways, erotic) desire for sacrifice, a desire that is intimately connected with anguish.

8. *Œuvres (In)complètes*: Inconclusive Closing Rites

> *And Finally, Incompletion*
> Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, 490

> *The impossibility of finishing such a thought (one that seeks the impossible).*
> Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*, n.1, 85

In a footnote in his chapter on Bataillean sovereignty, Paul Hegarty remarks that "[a]lmost all commentary on Bataille attributes great significance to the incompletion

of much of his writing, noting also the plethora of barely started books" (n.1, 85). However, he says, the sense of 'incompletion' in Bataille's work "seems to me far more interesting when it appears in an apparently complete text, where the incompletion is 'integral'" (n.1, 85) – for example in a work that was "not deemed complete enough to be published" – one such text, Hegarty believes, being the third volume of *The Accursed Share* (73). While only a footnote, Hegarty's remark has broader implications for Bataille's theoretical and practice-led notion of sacrifice than initially meets the eye. It is this very blurring of the theoretical and the practice-led that has informed this doctoral thesis as a whole, as I have demonstrated in the first section of this exegesis, and it is this sense of 'incompletion' that not only marks each of the stories that follow this exegesis, but it is also something that will forever shadow Bataille's life and work in mystery.

This exegesis has analysed and contextualised Bataille's theory of sacrifice – contextualised his theory not only within his vast network of asystematic ideas, but also within the fields of anthropological, theological and philosophical thought in nineteenth and twentieth century France. Through this analysis I have discussed the ways that Bataille's notion of sacrifice interacts with his reinterpretation of religion and mysticism as well as the way that Bataille's position on sacrifice was political (consider Bataille's disdain for the boredom of bourgeois life). I have argued that Bataille contemplated sacrifice all his life, from his time at the seminary, to his later writings on war and the economy. Bataille believed that in the modern world, sacrifice could no longer be carried out as a bloody spectacle, but rather that it appeared through the 'useless waste-products' of eroticism, laughter and literature.

In reading the collection of stories that follow this exegesis, a collection entitled *Parables of Impossible Bodies*, it is my hope that the reader will notice that neither part of this doctoral thesis has been researched for or written in isolation from the other. Both aspects of this doctoral thesis go hand-in-hand, although both can also be read separately. Both the exegesis and creative project form a commentary on and a contextualisation of Bataille's life and thought, and of the intellectual climate in France at the time. Furthermore, both the exegesis and creative project address the new forms of discussion about religion and sacrifice that have emerged in the wake of Bataille's death and in the recent renewed interest in Bataille's thought.

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